

# on spec

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## Quirk express—the art of Grant Leier

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Jaine **Fenn** Kate **Riedel** James Stephen **Forrest**  
Susan **Mayse** Holly **Phillips** Carl **Sieber**

nonfiction by Gordon **Snyder** Peter **Watts**

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*Speculative fiction offers far more than  
escape from this world: it can also help us  
find ways of living within it...*

# Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Clone

Peter Watts, Fiction Editor

I WRITE THIS NEAR A CINEMATIC FULCRUM OF SORTS. *THE Fellowship of the Ring* premieres about two weeks from now; *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*<sup>1</sup> opened about two weeks back. What sets these movies apart from overhyped also-ran sf like *Mission to Mars* is that they are still, primarily, offshoots of *literary* phenomena. Tolkien and Rowling currently reign over bestseller lists continent-wide. In a world of declining literacy, people are reading again, in record numbers.

People are reading *speculative* fiction, in record numbers.

I think it sucks.

Don't misunderstand: I've nothing against either hobbits or pint-sized necromancers. *Harry Potter* was, I thought, an okay movie, and I have high hopes for Peter Jackson's take on Tolkien (it could hardly, after all,

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<sup>1</sup> Or *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* if you live in the States, where philosophers are evidently considered way too wussy and intellectual for these gun-totin' kneejerk times.

be worse than Ralph Bakshi's). I'm as big a fan of good escapist fantasy as the next geek.

But when it comes right down to it, that's what it is: *escapist* fantasy. Tolkien himself made the point, in defiance of all those who would his trilogy with Allegory and Moral Archetype. Nope, J.R.R. insisted. Nothing so profound. He just wanted to tell a good story.

A good story is nothing to sneeze at. But there's a deeper reason to hang out in the genre ghetto, a reason I like to call "the real world." In the real world, we're cloning people. The likelihood that we are descended from Martian microbes commands sober attention in *Science* and *Nature*. We've hunted God Itself down to a pitiful refuge in the temporal lobe. And we're still on the verge of tearing the world down around our ears—at least that hasn't changed in the past few decades.

Escapism? That's what the Mundanes have always accused us of: imaginary respites from pimples and parents' basements and geekish virginity. But now, more than ever, the world needs a literature that deals with *reality*. The world needs *science* fiction. Literary simulations, if you will: models, based on profoundly imperfect data, that try to give us some sense of where we're headed. Or of where we *already are*, rather—for truth be told, we haven't been moving towards the future for some time now. We've been deep inside it for years.

People know it, too. It scares them shitless. You can tell by the way they shut their eyes and hum real loud as science tears their security blankets to shreds (Nope, no sign of the Soul in *this* nucleotide... looks like clockwork all the way down...). You can tell by the way our leaders—lawyers, businessmen, corporate geeks immersed in their own second-rate role-playing game of Monopoly—race to ban any research that might prove too threatening to Josephine Sixpack's desperate comfy worldview. And you can tell by the way the recent renaissance in "speculative fiction" is dominated by wizards, elves, and Jedi Knights.

But speculative fiction offers far more than escape from this world: it can also help us find ways of living *within* it. George Orwell used sf to explore the ramifications of language as thought-control. John Brunner used it to remind us that we ignore life-support systems at our own peril. William Gibson not only pointed out the traps awaiting us in cyberspace, he invented the word.

It's something the Mundanes don't seem to get: science fiction, at its most profound, is the very antithesis of "predicting the future." Orwell didn't write *1984* as a blueprint, but as a warning. (Were he to glance through the current Newspeak lexicon—"peacemaker" equals MX missile, "collateral damage" equals dead civilians, "terrorist sympathizer"



equals any critic of George Dubya Bush—would he pat himself on the back for his prescience, or mourn his failure to avert the nightmare?) Science fiction is an exploration of *consequences*. It shows us the reefs lying just below the surface of *if-this-goes-on*, it highlights the dragons at the edge of the map—not to lead us towards such futures, but to help us *avoid* them<sup>2</sup>.

Of course, such course corrections are liable to be a tad more difficult than melting down a bit of rogue jewelry, or winning a game of Quid-ditch. And judging by the bestseller lists, most people just don't have the stomach for that kind of complexity.

Pity. •

2 The genre also provides us with a few milk chocolates amongst the dark—utopias that we could, if we wished, embrace as blueprints for a better future. B.F. Skinner's *Walden Two* and Huxley's *Island* would fall into this category, as might some of Kim Stanley Robinson's work. But is it just me, or do these occasional cherry-blossoms seem somehow unconvincing?

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*Keitha huffed impatiently, raising her voice. "It is a simple question. How long has your father been dead?"*

# Puce Boy

Michael Libling

DUMB.

Dumb as a gull humping a 747 dumb.

Fool stupid loser ass-backward idiot cretin moron sucker brain-dead dumb.

Ten thousand routes to NYC and he takes 87. Twenty-four years of every excuse in the book and overnight the interstate is okay by him. "Okay by me, Holly." Exactly what he said. Barely gave her AAA maps a second look. As if time had healed the wounds, made everything all better. Which it sure as hell hadn't. As if, at last, he was ready to fight the demons. Which he sure as hell wasn't. Seemed to think he could just drive by. Hardly pay it any notice. Trouble was, he never figured on the billboards. Never figured the place would still be standing. Not after all this time.

19 holes of rootin', tootin', shootin' fun!

Fort Bumpo's Mini-Putt

Exit 21-South on 9

Lake Arnold



Boys squealing in the back. "We wanna go, Daddy."

Holly pleading their case. "We have the time, Orry. We really do."

He shudders, guzzles air as if entering the final stage of natural childbirth, grits teeth, and whispers, "No. I don't like mini-golf." And on the eddies of his breath, already sour from the fear: "I don't like death sports."

Holly winces. "What?" Begins to giggle, catches herself, not really sure of what the heck she actually heard him say. "You don't like...what?"

He flicks off the cruise control and kicks down on the accelerator. Only interest he has in Exit 21 is in putting it behind him.

"Please, Orry, slow down," she begs, voice calm, mindful not to alarm the children. But with that spooked rabbit look. Worry descending in an ashen veil. Steeling herself, as his secrets roil to the surface yet again. "You're going too fast..."

He had never told her the story. Never once told anyone, in fact. Holly could live with most of his quirks—the fast-food burger phobia, for one. The moods. But adding miniature golf to the mix would have been a risky stretch. Too damn loopy, for sure. He could explain it, of course, but not without exposing himself to be a downswing less than sane.

Dumb as a dick on a scarecrow dumb.

IT HAD BEEN JUST HIM AND HIS MOTHER THEN. IN THE DATSUN 510.

"Orry, wake up, we're here." Left hand on the wheel, she reached behind and gently shook him by the shoulder. "C'mon, honey."

"Gee, Mom." Sprawled across the back seat, sneakers propped on vinyl sill, he yawned, stretched arms, opened eyes, and caught his first glimpse of Bumppo's in passing.

Anyone who ever summered at Lake Arnold knew Fort Bumppo's Mini-Putt. A half-mile south of the interstate, nestled on the terraced hillside where old Highway 9 doubles back on itself before doddering down into the village proper, you could hardly miss it.

"Looks like fun, doesn't it?" his mother said. She eased up on the gas and downshifted through the rusty hairpin.

Flags panted damp and lifeless along the stockade that fronted the course, rough-hewn uprights alternating red, white, and blue. A sprawling coonskin cap roofed a trio of ramshackle huts: a ticket booth, an ice cream stand, a souvenir shop; *Welcome Settlers* scripted in red, ran boldly to the tip of the curlicued tail. Behind, a plaster Indian towered, keeping grim watch, arms folded across bare chest, a tomahawk in hand, legs straddling the path, paint worn to gray on calves, thighs and crotch.

Orry blinked. Took a second look. Cocked his head, confused, defen-

sive. Blinked again. A girl appeared to be waving to him from the steps leading up from the parking lot. At least, he thought it was a girl. More like some crazed gnome, really. Squat. Spongy. Flowing into the concrete rather than standing upon it. Gag shop glasses with googly eyes sprung from frosted panes. Teeth, ivory monoliths that may well have glowed green in the dark. Someone you might expect to find with pointy ears and sharper shoes, assisting a dime store Santa or, more likely, bludgeoning the old guy to death beneath the tree. Beside her, taller, a blond girl brandished two putters, twirling them above her head as if she were a helicopter beating for takeoff. Hair tumbling in waves to shoulders. Hot-pink hot-pants and long, long legs.

"In Lake Arnold for less than a minute and it looks as if you've already made friends," observed his mother.

He reddened, turned away quickly. "Don't even know them," he grumbled. *Why would they be waving at him, anyway?* "Stupid girls." But he stole a second glance before Bumpo's vanished round the bend. The place looked kind of neat. Girls or no girls, he would check it out up close. He would have plenty of time to kill.

ORRY HAD PUT UP QUITE A STINK AT FIRST. SHOT BACK WITH EVERY ARGUMENT HE could muster; some even made good sense. But not enough to sway his mother. She accepted the job at Goodkind's Resort without his approval. "With everything that's happened, honey, we need to get away. It will do the both of us a lot of good. You'll see." When in doubt, she always chose empathy, and the two had come to savor the closeness that inevitably followed.

"But what am I going to do all day while you're off working?"

She laughed. "Believe me, keeping yourself busy will be the least of your worries. You're going to have a great time, Orry. I promise."

"But I still think it's weird, Mom. I never heard of any hotel that had a nurse."

"Well, some do. And Goodkind's is one of them."

"So how come they never needed one before?" He couldn't help himself; he had to bait her, force her to admit how the job had come to be. How Ray Goodkind had invented it for her.

But she refused to bite. Merely rambled on with the now familiar refrain. As if she had memorized the lines for school. "The nearest hospital is way over in Saratoga. Ray says a nurse will let him take better care of his guests. A lot of them are older, and prone to more than just blackfly bites and sunburn. Ray says I'll make them feel safer, and that's good for business."

*Ray says. Ray says. Ray says. "Ray sure says a lot."*

"Don't be a smart aleck," she said, her disappointment in him more heartfelt than he had expected. "You've no reason to talk to me like that. We're friends, remember? Ray is a very nice man."

He lowered his eyes, guilt like graffiti on his cheeks. "I still never heard of any hotel nurse," he pouted.

"At fourteen, you'll find there's a lot you've never heard."

"Wanna bet?" he said, immediately regretting he had spoken the challenge aloud.

"Yes," she snapped, imposing closure. "And if you're as smart as you think you are, you'll quit before you say something you'll really be sorry for."

*Who did Ray Goodkind think he was anyhow? Jerk. Why couldn't she see that?*

WHERE SO MANY OF ITS COMPETITORS HAD CRUMBLLED BY THE WAYSIDE, FOUNDATIONS overrun by scrub or lakefront development, Goodkind's Resort had managed to survive. An earnestly rustic welter of sprightly painted gables, gutters and hammered down shutters. The collective upchuck of a dozen failed schools of architecture. All keen on porches and exotic cornices.

In the main lodge, on the wall opposite the reception desk, a sepia chronology told all. From the founding in '21 to the ascendancy of Ray, "following the tragic death of Mr. Leonard Goodkind." Photos of the three big fires: August '33, July '44 and October '68. Photos of proud men smiling beside dead fish.

Rebuilt. Refinanced. Restored. So much so, the latest incarnation of Goodkind's won Ray and his "state-of-the-art smoke detection and sprinkler system" the cover of *Resort Management Monthly*. "Goodkind, The Hostelry Wunderkind" was how that August issue heralded him. Orry's mother kept a copy on her night table. It was Orry's first clue.

"Since when do you read this?" he asked.

"Since the man on the cover gave it to me in the hospital."

"You know this wunderkind guy? Really?"

"Uh-huh. He was a patient of mine."

"What was the matter with him?"

"He had an allergic reaction."

"To what?"

"Peanuts."

"Peanuts?"

"Uh-huh. Almost killed him. He was in very bad shape when they brought him."

"And now?"



"He's fine. As a matter of fact, you're going to get the chance to meet him. He'll be visiting soon."

"Visiting? Who?"

"Me," she said, followed by an unconvincing "Us."

After that, Orry made sure *Resort Management Monthly* lay on the night table with the cover face-down.

THE MORE RAY TRIED TO WIN HIM OVER, THE LESS ORRY WANTED TO BE WON.

"Consider yourself a guest, Orson," he said, hips tilted in a stationary swagger, the salmon from lunch fresh upon his breath. "The resort is yours to use as you please—as long as you obey the rules, of course."

"Orry. I've told you, I'm Orry. Nobody calls me Orson." He edged closer to the bike stand, feigning interest in a battered blue Schwinn.

"I know. But mark my words, when you grow up, you'll prefer something more formal." That was one of the problems with Ray, he knew everything. Even things he didn't know.

"Then how come you don't call yourself Raymond?"

Goodkind chuckled, the humor curdling in the space between them. "Well, you got me there, except for the fact my name is Raybourne, son."

"I'm not your son."

"I didn't mean it that way. You know that." He extended a bony and conciliatory palm. "C'mon, Ors? Truce?"

*Ors? Cripes! That was a new one.* Orry hoisted the Schwinn out of the rack. "I got to go."

Ray pocketed his hand. "For a haircut, I hope? It's getting mighty shaggy?"

Orry pretended not to hear.

"I don't care what you say, son, we're going to be friends. You'll see."

Orry coasted up the beaten path and swung into the saddle, muttered: "Eat some peanuts, why don't you?" Pedaled the road to Fort Bumpo's Mini-Putt without looking back.

THE THIRD HOLE WAS A PAR 5 DOOZY. *TICONDEROGA'S TEEPEE TERROR*. A DRIVE DEAD center promised to send smoke signals up through the teepee roof and almost guaranteed a hole-in-one. Slice a tad to the right or left, however, and the ball would die in a gravel rough.

Orry shot. The ball struck the wall of the teepee and dribbled back to his feet.

Someone cackled behind him, but he didn't look. Playing solo was embarrassing enough.

He shot again. The ball struggled up the ramp, gasped in failure, and retreated meekly.

The cackles grew louder. But he refused to acknowledge them.

Again. The ball hooked left, rattled into the hole, skittered through the teepee and into the rough.

"I can see why you play alone. How else could you bear the shame?"

He turned to face his tormentors, knowing it would be them—the girls he had seen on that first day. The shapeless gnome with the goofy glasses and big teeth. *Even creepier up close.* And the tall, pretty one. *Even prettier up close.*

"You're a horrible player," said the gnome with immense disgust, as if her pronouncement would be a revelation to him. Voice high and nasal. A castrato with hay fever. He couldn't place her age. Maybe 12, maybe 20, maybe God-knows-what.

He fired back, venting the anger reserved from his earlier encounter with Ray. "Jesus! Gimme a break. It's just my first time. What makes you so darn special, anyhow?"

She smirked a snotty "This!" and set the ball upon the tee.

"Show him, Keitha," said the blond.

Keitha showed him.

Smoke signals puffed through the top of the teepee. "Usually that's a hole-in-one," she said, tipping the ball into the cup. "But I guess this isn't my day."

"Okay, I'm impressed," he said, trying hard not to be impressed. He stepped toward the fourth hole. *The Deerslayer.* Hoped the gnome would get the hint and find another mark to pester.

"Don't let it bother you," the blond smiled.

Orry shrugged, wary, assessing whether her concern was genuine. He kneeled, absorbed with the intricacies of the green.

"Keitha's father owns Fort Bumpo's. She plays a lot. This is her eleventh round since last night."

"Twelfth, Tess," Keitha corrected. Grin huge and hollow, nostrils concealed by upper lip. And then she hit him smack between the eyes: "How long has your father been dead?"

He froze. "Huh? What?" Ice down his spine, razors in his belly.

Keitha huffed impatiently, raised her voice. "It is a simple question. How long has your father been dead?"

He cleared his throat, breathed in ragged syllables: "How do you know about my father?"

"Because you look like your father's dead," she said flatly.

Now he was the castrato. "What's that supposed to mean?" No one had

ever phrased it quite so bluntly. *Passed away. Deceased. Departed. In Heaven. Gone to his reward. No longer with us. Even Kicked the bucket. But never dead.* Not ever.

"It's not *supposed* to mean anything. It means what I said."

He rose slowly, pondering his choices. "Did Ray tell you about my father? Is that how you know?"

"Ray? Who's Ray?"

"Then who told you?"

Hands at her mouth, sucking fingers, watching him. Coyness oozing like rancid musk.

"Tell me!" Orry looked to Tess for support, but she appeared more concerned with the yellow golf ball in her hand.

Keitha hissed exasperation. "Puce," she said to him. "Puce."

"I don't know anybody named Puce."

"Oh, God!" she groaned. "Let me guess: you were raised by wolves, you're Helen Keller, or you're a tourist? Puce is a color, idiot."

"A color?"

"Yes. Sort of purplish brown," Tess said quietly, avoiding his eyes. She lingered on her friend a moment, then, not quite sure of herself, confided: "Keitha sees people in colors."

"And you are puce," Keitha barked, jabbing him sharply in the ribs. "And puce boys have dead fathers."

His throat was tight, as if he had swallowed a jawbreaker whole. "What are you talking about?"

"If you need simultaneous translation, I suggest you visit the United Nations, Puce Boy."

"My name is Orry."

Keitha snorted. "Nice name. But you still don't have a father."

"You shut up about my father already. Just shut up." He threw down the putter, booted his ball out of the rough, and stomped down the hill toward the entrance. "You're crazy."

"What do you think you're doing?" Keitha shouted, face like a fist wrapped round a red balloon. "It's against the rules not to return your ball and club. Look, it's there in writing on your scorecard."

"You're nuts," he shouted back, crumpling the card and pitching it at her. *His father was dead, gone for almost two years—and out of nowhere, after all this time, the tears were finally coming. Of all the times, of all the places!*

"There are no refunds, you know?" She yapped at his heels as he drove for the gate. "No refunds ever. Just rain checks when it rains."

He wiped wet cheeks with the back of his wrist. Dodged a woman towing two boys in Speedos and rubber thongs. Cried hoarsely over their



heads: "You're crazy. Really crazy."

He rapped his shoulder off the Indian's left knee and tripped hip-first into the revolving gate. But it would not budge.

They were biding their time now, sizing him up. Keitha, putter pressed against her mouth, tongue teasing metal. Tess alongside, lips tight, bloodless.

"What are you staring at?" Again, he thumped the gate without success.

Tess cupped a hand over Keitha's ear, whispered, then withdrew. "Please. For me?"

Keitha sighed. "All right, if that's what you want, Tess. But you better do it quickly. Tell the puce boy now."

"Damn, stupid gate. Stuck or..."

"That's because you're pushing the wrong way, Orry," said Tess.

JUST WHAT HE NEEDED. THE BIKE WAS GONE.

He made his way back to Goodkind's on foot. Dreamed up excuse upon excuse along the way. Spotted Ray just outside the dining hall, a few minutes before dinner. And blurted out the truth.

Orry was ready for anything, except Ray's reaction.

"I'm glad you had the courage to come and tell me. The bike was old. Not even any need to tell your mother. We'll just keep this between us men. Deal?"

Ray offered his hand and Orry accepted. "Deal."

"But I do have one favor to ask."

Orry swallowed, suspicious. "Yeah?"

"The next time you take a bike off the property, make sure you bring a lock, too. Okay, Orson?"

"I—uh—okay, Raybourne."

"And get a haircut. You trying to be a hippie or something?"

ORRY MIGHT WELL HAVE MADE IT THROUGH THE SUMMER, NEVER ONCE RETURNING to Bumpopo's. Fully expected to. But one night, after dinner, his mother had a craving for a scoop of pistachio, and Ray, gushing over her as always, was eager to oblige: "I've a mind for chocolate ripple, myself." He winked inexplicably, saliva running high.

The three drove into Lake Arnold village.

When Ray took her hand to cross the street, Orry knew it was time to cut out. They were hardly bothering to hide it anymore, even caught them kissing once. "I don't feel like ice cream," he said.

They agreed on when and where to meet and went their separate ways.

Orry was sitting on the bench outside the Wonderland Arcade, contemplating a thick slab of fudge, when she came up behind him. "Rocky Road is my favorite, too."

July. Mid-week in Lake Arnold. Humidity neck-deep. Neon swirling through orphaned puddles. Moths sparring under street lights. Kids slaving for fried dough and snow cones. Moms and dads hemming and hawing over local arts and crafts no locals ever touched. Honeymooners billing and cooing, each silently suspecting the Poconos would have been a more memorable destination. Bikers dragging up Champlain Avenue, cops roaring in pursuit. Punks with packs of Camels up their sleeves, hassling nervous mothers and curious daughters for lights. School kids without shirts or shoes bitching at the doors of restaurants with signs that read NO SHIRT, NO SHOES, NO SERVICE. And Orry fumbling for something to say to Tess.

"Going to eat that all yourself?" she asked, eyes wide, bluer than he had remembered.

He offered up the fudge and caught her on the nose. *Idiot.*

She laughed, wiped the smudge away, licked it off her finger. "Mmmm...nice and creamy."

"Have some more," he said. Then, as if someone else were speaking: "I really like your hair that way." And wondered immediately if it was a too-corny thing to say.

She tossed her ponytail from left to right. "Thanks," she said, as if every boy she'd ever known had said the same. "I like your hair, too."

And not once did he stop to mull the fact and panic, that a conversation with this terrific girl was actually taking place, and he was holding his own.

Telling her where he was from.

Her telling him where she was from.

How Lake Arnold was more fun than he had expected.

How she hated living there. Too small.

How he liked scary movies.

How she liked peanut brittle.

How he liked club sandwiches.

How she hoped the rumors about the Beatles breaking up weren't true.

How he was 15. Almost.

How she was 16. Barely.

His sign of the zodiac.

Her sign of the zodiac.

How he wanted to be a newspaper reporter or a writer for *MAD Magazine*.

How she wanted to be an actress, but how everyone said secretary made more sense.

How his mother was a nurse. And about Ray, of course.

How a lot of people in the area worked at Goodkind's, and how she and Keitha had seen Old Man Goodkind play at Bumpo's not long before he drowned.

How *his* father had died. The fall, the broken neck, and all. The suddenness. No chance to say goodbye.

How terrible that must have been for him and his mother.

More about his Mom and Ray. How Ray wasn't so bad. But. But. But.

How Keets—Keitha—wasn't too bad either, once you got to know her. How, if it wasn't for Tess, Keitha wouldn't have a friend in the world—and how it was important to remind her every once in a while. How, after Keitha was born, her parents began to sleep in bunk beds. "Which is pretty odd, if you ask me." And how she had *heard* Keitha before she actually met her face-to-face. "She was singing happy birthday to herself. Imagine. Someone singing happy birthday to themselves. I think that must be the loneliest sound in the world."

"Yeah," Orry quavered, coughed, "that's lonely, all right." Tears welled up in his eyes as he choked on his laughter.

Tess glared at him quizzically, anger rising, then she suddenly saw the joke. She shrieked hysterically, "Singing happy birthday to herself..."

"And bunk beds too," he howled.

"Mom on top."

"Dad on the bottom."

They sat, their bellies aching. Touching each other. Tears streaming down their cheeks. Hiccupping. Gulping air. Until they and the night were spent or, more accurately, Ray honked the horn.

"C'mon, get in here, you hippie."

"Oh, Ray," his mother chided.

ORRY SAW TESS A LOT AFTER THAT NIGHT, DESPITE RAY'S DOUBTS. "SHE'S A LITTLE old for you, isn't she?" Took her rowing on Lake Meserve. Went berry-picking up on Mount Beechwood. Swam lengths in the pool. Hugged her below the surface in the deep end, and came up sputtering when she kissed him on the mouth—his first kiss ever. Went horseback riding without a guide and without permission, and barely minded the lecture from Ray that followed. "I knew she'd be trouble, putting ideas like that in your head. I've heard stories about that girl..." Even let her coax him back to Bumpo's for a complete round, compliments of a surprisingly subdued Keitha.



The girls trounced him, their margins of victory too many strokes to count. But he did get a rise out of them when he drove the ball up the rattler's spine and down the gullet of the cougar for a hole-in-one on the bonus 19th, *The Last Of Our Mohicans*.

This outing, Keitha reserved her heckling for others on the course.

"Nothing wrong with your putting a frontal lobotomy wouldn't cure."

"Is your seeing-eye dog in the car?"

"This can't be the first time your girlfriend has seen you fail to put it in the hole."

"Any more strokes on your scorecard and we'll have to call in a heart specialist."

Most took it well, laughing her off as the oddity she was. But some couldn't handle it.

A bean-shaven troglodyte in a Penn State t-shirt and denim cutoffs, his wisp of a girlfriend simpering restraint, blustered, "I'd kick your face in if it wasn't already kicked in, you little bitch."

Keitha didn't blink. "Remind me to wave a colorful bye-bye to him," she said to Tess. "He won't be leaving blue, I promise you."

An older man with a Canada flag pinned to his shirt, caddying two grandchildren as his wife watched from a wheelchair at the stockade, took Keitha aside at *Leather-stocking Lunge*, and wagged a lethal finger in her face: "You're a very nasty young lady and I've a mind to report you to both the proprietor and the New York State Tourist Authority."

Keitha yawned aloud. "Ho hum," she said. "You can report anything you want, but my father has owned Fort Bumpo's for over twenty years and absolutely nothing will come of it." And then quietly to Tess: "Already a perfect white. Should be any day now."

After each incident, Orry asked, "What are you talking about?"

Each time, Tess replied, "Nothing you need to worry about, Orry."

"And that's the whole puce and nothing but the puce," Keitha quipped.

"DO YOU LIKE RAY?" HIS MOTHER ASKED HIM ONE MORNING.

He had seen it coming for weeks.

She eased herself beside him on the bed. Tentative. "You know I like Ray a lot, don't you?"

He reached for his socks.

"And you know that Ray likes me?"

He shrugged, intent on an ant as it sprinted down the blind and onto the window sill.

"I know what you're thinking, Orry, but Daddy's not coming back. You

know that. We have to get on with our lives, Orry. Living in the past isn't good for either of us."

He moved to the window, stared blankly out.

"Ray asked me to marry him, Orry."

Rigid. Eyes on the ant.

"I told him 'yes.' "

Incapable of facing her.

"I'll always be your mother, Orry, no matter what. Loving Ray doesn't mean I love you any less. Orry, please..."

The ant zigged, and Orry crushed it with his thumb before it had a chance to zag.

THERE WAS BINGO IN THE DINING HALL THAT NIGHT, BUT ORRY PASSED. "I just can't stand looking at the two of them," he told Tess.

She tried to make him see otherwise. "It doesn't sound like a raw deal to me, Orry. The Goodkinds are really nice people. Everybody in town says so."

"I don't like him, Tess. Honest, I've tried. I just don't like him. He's not my dad. He could never be my dad."

"And there's another thing, too, Orry." She ran her finger down his nose and to his lips. "We wouldn't have to say goodbye when summer's over. You'd be living here."

"Ray wouldn't make it easy for us. Some of the things he says, Tess..."

"He doesn't like me, does he?"

The moon cast a streamer of yellow crepe across the surface of the lake. He rowed until the night enveloped them and any noise from shore was distant and indistinct, then pulled the oars aboard. They drifted, lying together, the lake and starry sky as one, and they a solitary mote upon it.

A long while passed before, at last, she said, "If you really hate him that much, Orry, there is a way." The boat rocked as she stepped gingerly to the stern. "Something could happen to Ray."

He pulled himself up onto the bench at the bow. Hands clasped between knees, a baseball catcher, readying to snag her every word.

She measured him carefully, the furrows of his brow, the telltale heaving of his chest. But not until the stillness of the night had tightened its grip upon them did she begin to tell the story, not unlike a mother comforting her child at bedtime. "Bumppo's is a place where people's futures are decided—good or bad. And the colors Keitha sees tell her what those futures will be."

"Like a crossroads or something...?"

"Uh-huh." A throaty, nervous giggle. "But Keitha calls them...*fate stations*."

She dipped a hand into the water and surveyed the lake as if someone might be listening from afar. "But there are only a few of them over here. That's why most of us go through life and nothing bad ever happens. But in other places—like India and China, Keitha says fate stations are everywhere. At watering holes, pagodas—wherever people gather. That's why they have all those disasters and a million people get wiped out in a single shot."

"How does she know all this?" he asked, his skepticism like a dart.

"I don't know," she snapped, her anger instantly eclipsed by understanding. "She just does. You don't have to believe me, Orry. But she says we're going to have fate stations all over America, too, one day. But not like in India or China. Here, they'll be mini-putts and hamburger places, mostly."

He was sure he would spill his guts right then and there, maybe capsize the boat. "Mini-putts and burger places!" He trembled from scalp to sole as he wrestled with his laughter. "You're kidding me, right? Her parents tell her that stuff?" *How gullible could Tess be? How gullible did she expect him to be?*

"No. They don't know anything. They never come onto the course anymore—except when it's real busy and Keitha needs them. Whatever Keitha knows, she just knows."

"So if she looked at Ray, she'd know if something was going to happen to him?"

Tess nodded gravely. "But she only sees the colors at Bumpopo's."

"And what if she sees nothing is going to happen?"

"That's not how it works, Orry." Again, she searched the lake, as if rethinking her strategy. "People's colors change all the time—sometimes from hole to hole. The only color that matters is the color you are when you leave Fort Bumpopo's."

"But she said I was puce. My color didn't change?"

"The puce is only your aura; the rest of you did change. Keitha just made sure you left with a safe color. I asked her to do that."

"Safe colors? This is way too much, Tess, c'mon..."

"Whites are the worst. They mean something bad will happen real soon. Blues are best. Especially lavender blue. That's what Keitha likes me to be. Nothing bad ever happens to blues. And then there are all the colors in between. Tangerine. Amaranth. Keitha knows more colors than even the Crayola people."

"So if I bring Ray to Bumpopo's...?"



"It would be just a matter of getting him to leave...at the right moment."

"And then?"

"I don't know. Keitha never knows exactly. Only thing certain is that something *will* happen."

"This is crazy."

"But it's all true, Orry. *Keitha knew about your dad.* And a couple of years ago, when Ray's father, Old Man Goodkind, played at Bumpopo's with a bunch of men from the Rotary Club, he left *white*. Keitha said he didn't have long, and a few days later he drowned. Just like that. She didn't know he'd drown, but she knew he'd be dead."

Orry gulped, took a deep breath. "I hate Ray, but not that much, Jesus." He swallowed, inhaled again. "I don't want him to die; I don't want that."

"Then maybe you just want him to leave with one of those in-between colors?"

"Yeah. Something to just scare him away from my mom and me. For good."

KEITHA WASN'T HAPPY. "YOU TOLD HIM EVERYTHING, TESS? EVERYTHING?"

"He needed my help. He won't tell anybody. He promises."

Orry nodded, sincerity his mantra.

"But *you* promised, too, Tess, and now look what you've done? I knew you were seeing too much of him. I knew this would happen."

"He won't tell anyone, Keitha. He won't."

"I won't, I swear."

"That was supposed to be between me and you, Tess. No one else. *Our* secret. That's what made it special."

Tess examined the buckles of her sandals, toes crossed. "I'm sorry," she said, pouting, tongue moistening her lips, gauging her friend's reaction from the corner of her eye, sharing a secret smile with Orry. "But you'll do this for me, won't you, Keets? Us best friends and all...?"

Keitha snatched the glasses from her nose, spit harshly on each lens and buffed them on the hem of her dress. "Tell me, Puce Boy," she said, "when were you planning to bring *your friend*?"

"As soon as I can, I guess."

"Then bring him."

"But remember, I don't want him to die or anything."

"He wants an in-between color, Keets."

■

RAY GOODKIND DROVE A HARD BARGAIN. "I'LL PLAY ON ONE CONDITION, ORS. YOU get your hair cut first."

Orry didn't hesitate. The sacrifice would be worth it. Besides, his hair would come back while Ray presumably would not.

"That's nice," his mother said. "You boys have fun." To say anything more, she feared, would surely jeopardize the moment.

AS AGREED, ORRY AND RAY ARRIVED LATE ON A WEDNESDAY NIGHT, JUST AFTER the curtain had rung down on the Goodkind weekly talent show. The finale had dragged on—"Yesterday" rendered consecutively by trumpet, mandolin, accordion, and mezzo-soprano from New Rochelle. Ray hummed the tune as Tess greeted them beneath the tail of the coonskin roof. "Hello, Mr. Goodkind," she said, followed by a disbelieving, "My god! What happened to your hair, Orry?"

"It was Ray's idea," he said glumly.

"You must admit, young lady, he looks significantly more human."

Tess smiled, as if an earwig were creeping across her tongue, and handed them their balls, putters and scorecard.

Keitha locked up the ticket booth and switched off the neon sign that beckoned on route 9. Orry and Ray would be the final twosome of the night.

KEITHA AND TESS KEPT WATCH FROM THE STOCKADE. WHEN RAY'S COLOR WAS right, Keitha would step forward, announce she was forced to close early because her father had taken ill, and then rush the two through the exit with rain checks. Simple. Effective. Foolproof. Except nothing happened. They played hole after hole after hole and Keitha did not budge.

Discouraged, Orry pressed on, enduring Ray's persistent volleys, noxious amalgams of guidance and gloating.

"Bend your knees more, Ors. Straighten that back. Chin up. Chin up! I said, 'chin up!'"

"Coordination of hand and eye. That's all there is to it, Ors."

"Don't be a namby-pamby, son. Address the ball."

*"Luck, Ors, is merely good planning, brilliantly executed."*

By the 18th, *Natty's Nightmare*, Orry was certain Keitha's *talent* was a sham; Ray would be a part of his life forever. Worse yet, Ray was whupping him by thirty strokes. *The jerk was under friggin' par!*

Eight punching bags swung suspended around and over the putting tee, leaving little room for a player to maneuver. Painted on each bag was a ferocious Iroquois warrior, tomahawks and knives poised for the kill. It was called the gauntlet, and, somehow, players were expected to putt through to the hole. There lay the second part of the challenge:

three dwarf grizzlies guarded the cup, prowling about it in circles, rearing onto their hindquarters at random intervals. The best way to play the hole changed constantly.

Orry crammed himself among the swaying Iroquois and putted. The ball trickled timidly out from under the warriors and stopped well short of the grizzlies.

Ray elbowed his way to the tee. "Let me show you how it's done, son." He twisted his left arm awkwardly behind him and heaved two warriors aside, keeping them at bay, his arm straight, but trembling against the pendulous weight. Face flushed, he teetered, struggling to *address the ball* with his free hand. He swung and simultaneously the two Iroquois broke loose. Fury unleashed, they slammed against him, hurling him headlong into the plastic turf. His ball shot from the tee and struck Orry's dead-on, propelling it under a grizzly; it rimmed the hole, skittered left under the butt of a second bear, before the third unceremoniously pawed it into the cup. Ball sunk, the grizzlies froze.

Orry beheld his ball agape. "Um...does that count as a hole-in-one for me?"

Ray wiggled out from under his attackers and wobbled to his feet. His lip was bleeding. "Damn," he said, "I think I chipped a tooth. Jesus. Can you believe that?"

"Does that count as a hole-in-one?" Orry asked again.

Ray massaged his cheek, feeling for damage. "For chrissake, no," he sputtered.

"But I only took one shot..."

"It's not a hole-in-one, Ors, that's all there is to it. The ball comes out."

"But—"

Keitha interrupted, Tess a step behind. "Excuse me," she said politely, quite unlike herself.

Orry's heart began to gallop. He stared at Ray, straining to materialize a color. Any color.

Keitha tendered the story, about her father taking ill.

"Now wait a minute," Ray protested. "I almost kill myself and now..."

She stuck with the script. Handed him a pair of rain checks.

Ray frowned, inspecting the chits. "Well, I guess that's fair, seeing as how we're almost done."

"Please, I really must close up." Keitha collected their clubs and herded them toward the exit.

Ray folded the coupons into his wallet. "Must have turned my ankle, too," he grimaced, limping forward. "That 18th is dangerous."



Orry lagged behind. "What color?" he whispered to Tess.

She shook her head.

"You asked for an in-between..." Keitha assured, her mouth a flat line. "Quickly now, before it changes. Before yours changes, too."

"Pardon me?" said Ray.

"Nothing," said Orry, clipping Ray's heels as he prodded him through the gate.

ORRY'S MOTHER TENDED TO RAY'S SCRAPES AND BRUISES WHILE ORRY WENT OFF TO bed. "I never imagined miniature golf could be such a rough a sport," she said, clearly amused.

Orry had expected to lie awake the entire night. Didn't think he would sleep at all until the *in-between color* did whatever it was supposed to do. But nary a disturbing thought intruded, and he fell fast and deep asleep.

Sunrise leaked round the edges of the window shade, but it was the commotion outside that awoke him. He peeked through to morning, but saw only the row of cedars and a dirty sky overhead. Smelled smoke.

"Ma," he called. "Mom?" But her bed was empty. Untouched from the night before. Panic knocked the wind from him. He gulped for the door, stopped. Scrambled back for his jeans. Pulled them up over his jockey shorts and ran outside.

The main lodge was in flames. Although the fire had yet to reach the gables or Ray's quarters, it was swiftly spreading in that direction. "Mom!" he shouted. But all eyes and ears remained focused on the fire, the bucket brigade in full swing and a Lake Arnold pumper wheezing up the road.

In-between colors didn't kill. He had been told they didn't kill. *Unless Keitha had lied? Sent Ray out with something other than in-between?*

He had to save his mother. Had to. But how?

The porch was ablaze. There was no way in, no way out. Except through the windows. *Why weren't they at the windows? Was he already too late?* Once, years before, there had been a fire in a house on his street. When the firemen entered, they discovered the couple who lived there on the floor beside their bed, unscarred, but dead from the fumes. *Had Ray and his mother met the same fate?*

Mind set, steps deliberate, he trudged up the path to the lodge. Felt the heat flush his face, scorch his chest. Then heard the shriek behind him. "Orry. My God, Orry! What are you doing?" Turned. Saw his mother at the front of the crowd. In her housecoat. Ray beside her. Arm about her waist. Hand on her shoulder. Holding her back.

Relief rushed through him in torrents. Relief for the *both* of them. "Mom," he tried to say, throat seared raw. "Mom," he tried to shout, but only rasped.

Timbers cracked, braying in agony, as the ceiling bellowed painfully to the floor, and twisters of spark and flame ripped into the second storey, lapping at the rafters, blackening, then shattering the windows.

Shards flew. Cinders peppered his back. He saw the horror in his mother's face, the dread in Ray's, and hauled himself towards them, miraculously unscathed.

The bucket brigade had now given way to the Lake Arnold volunteers. Pumps were being primed. Hoses snaked up from lakeside.

But something wasn't right. The onlookers, who had been gathered about his mom and Ray, were retreating, scattering to the sides, isolating the pair whose attention remained solely on him. Orry saw why.

A big, baby blue Chrysler was barreling towards them, gaining momentum as it rolled silently down the roadway that sloped from cabins 1 to 12. Orry raised his hands to warn them, voice nowhere to be found.

His mother turned. Too late. The Chrysler smacked her harshly aside, discarding her into the shrubbery as if she were too small a catch. But Ray. Ray was another story altogether.

The vehicle scooped him off the ground and splayed him to the hood like a virgin bound for sacrifice. Pajama crotch wrapped round the ornament of the hood. Housecoat crumpled up about his neck, belt loop hooked on wiper blade.

Orry glanced down at the license plate. *Ontario*. And as the car rumbled by, he saw an old man slumped behind the wheel, same old man he had seen at Fort Bumpo's, the old guy who had been caddying his grandkids and then threatened Keitha. From the back seat, his wife looked on. Helpless. Her wheelchair folded away.

"Ray," Orry whimpered, reaching out. But Ray heard nothing, eyes fixed in disbelief on the inferno dead ahead. *Where in the hell was his state-of-the-art sprinkler system?*

Orry did not watch as the Chrysler tore through what remained of the porch. Did not watch as the flames eagerly wolfed it down. Did not hear Ray's screams. Did not wait for the explosion.

He ran to his mother, but others were already attending to her. He could not tell if she were alive or dead; he was too frightened to ask. He backed off. Willed himself invisible. Began to walk. Trot. Jog.

•

HE DID NOT STOP UNTIL HE ARRIVED AT THE FEET OF THE BIG INDIAN. FOR THE first time, he noticed the brass plaque screwed to a moccasin: *In memory*

of *CHINGACHGOOK*. And then, above him, he saw Keitha. An avenging angel clipped of its wings.

"You said he was an in-between color. That's what you said."

She looked down from the ladder, squeegee in hand, not the least bit ruffled by the intrusion. "What brings you out so bright and early, Puce Boy? Did your wish come true?"

"I didn't wish for *that*."

"Oh? Really?" She dipped the squeegee into the pail and scraped it across Chingachgook's chest.

"Orry!" Tess called from the 16th. She propped a rake against a buck with broken antlers and shuffled down the gravel slope, pebbles spraying in her wake. "My God, what happened?"

His foot was cut. His chest and shoulders were streaked with soot. He struggled to explain, tears flowing freely. "Ray. And my mother, too," he said. "Fire. The whole lodge."

"Oh, Orry, I'm so sorry." She threw her arms around him, buried her face in his neck and sobbed along with him.

Tenderly, he pulled Tess aside. Again, he challenged Keitha. "You said he was going to leave with an in-between color."

"No. That's what *you* said. That's what *Tess* said." She flung the squeegee into the bucket and hoisted it down from the ladder. "I never promised anything." The bucket dropped with a damp thud; water sloshed over the sides and pooled beneath the Indian.

"And my mother...what about my mother?" His fists were clenched. "Nobody said anything about hurting her."

Keitha leaned close, her breath a shroud across his face. "That's life now, isn't it, Puce Boy?"

Tess stroked the back of his hand. "Sometimes, Orry, people with bad fates take others down with them. Happens all the time. Plane crashes, for instance. All it takes is a single *white* and everybody pays the price—no matter what color they may be."

"Even lavender blues," Keitha added, glancing softly at Tess.

"She can't get away with this, Tess. I'm going to tell."

"But who would you tell, Orry?"

"Yes, Puce Boy. Who?"

"Think about it, Orry: there is nothing for Keitha to get away with. She didn't really do anything. She simply saw the colors and no one can prove or disprove that."

Keitha smirked, the corners of her reaching ever closer to her ears. "On the other hand, maybe you *should* tell someone, Puce Boy."

"Stop bullying him, Keitha," Tess said sharply.



Keitha stamped her foot and spun about. She toppled the ladder onto its side and slammed it shut.

Tess gently wiped a tear from Orry's cheek. "If you tell, they'll only think you're crazy."

"And even if they do believe you, Puce Boy, you'll be guiltiest of all." Wrath cleaved Keitha's face into a ruptured hock of blood and bone, sinews aquiver. "You were the one who brought Ray Goodkind here. Before last night, he'd never been to Bumpo's."

Tess held him close. "There's nothing you can do, Orry. Nothing we can do."

He backed away, hesitated. "Come with me, Tess. I got to go...to see about my mother."

"Yes. Go, Tess." The ladder clattered noisily as Keitha dragged it towards the shed.

Tess swallowed. "I can't," she said, ashamed. "She won't tell me what color I am until you're gone, Orry. Gone from Lake Arnold for good. And you can't go either, Orry, not without knowing. Please tell him, Keitha. Please."

The ladder crashed to the ground, skidded up against a cast-iron toadstool. Keitha crept closer, paused beside a plaster beaver, and raked her fingernails down its spine. "And I hope you leave very, very soon, Puce Boy."

"Mind your own business."

"What a brilliant comeback! Puce Boy is quite the wit."

"You haven't seen the last of me."

"Oh, haven't I?" Keitha bristled, eyebrows squirming like newborn tentworms. "That all depends on the color you are when you pass through the gate."

"I don't care what color I am."

"Good. Because I certainly won't tell you."

He grabbed Tess by the wrist. "Come."

She kissed him on the cheek. "No," she sobbed. "And you can't go either, not without knowing. Tell him, Keitha. Please." But her friend remained unmoved.

He squeezed her hand, released it with reluctance. "I'll come back for you," he whispered gallantly, shut his eyes, and committed himself to the exit.

The barred gate shut with a loud clank behind him. The finality thundered through his skull.

Keitha dangled the key for him to see. She smiled, teeth like ivory daggers. "You're lucky, Puce Boy. You shifted colors at the last moment and,

I'm afraid, escaped with a rather tame in-betweenner." She sighed. "I'm afraid we'll all just have to be patient."

Orry steadied himself on the turnstile bars, tried to speak, but nothing came to mind or mouth. He reeled into the parking lot as if on the cusp of a fifth of vodka.

Keitha shouted to him from atop the stockade. "There's one more thing."

Head up. Swaying.

"Puce boys with a hint of vermillion also have dead mothers."

HE WAS WELL UP THE ROAD, UNAWARE THAT TESS HAD CHOSEN TO CHASE AFTER him. Didn't find out or put two and two together until the day Aunt Con and Uncle Neil came to get him. Just happened to notice the paper lying on the sheriff's desk, her picture, and the story—about a local girl being the victim of a hit and run, just outside the gates of Fort Bumppo's Mini-Putt.

DUMB.

Dumb as a cliff diver working at low tide dumb.

"I knew this would happen," Holly says, more smug than angry.

The state trooper hands him the ticket. "Three kids and a fine-looking wife... Ain't worth risking the lives of loved ones, pal."

Eyes fixed on Exit 21.

"You take it easy, now." The trooper slaps the roof of the mini-van and saunters back to his car, the lights still flashing red and blue.

"Nice man," Holly says cheerfully.

Breath on hold. He turns the key. Shifts to drive. But the van does not agree to go. A fat, metal cow lowing in tar sand.

"What now?" Holly seems to think he might have the answer.

Eyes fixed on Exit 21.

The cop taps on the window. "You musta run over something on the shoulder. You got a couple of flats, pal. Ripped pretty bad."

They climb out. Examine the damage.

"There's a real fine mini-putt just down the road, run by a couple of real nice ladies," the trooper says. "Why don't I take you and your boys over while hubby waits for the tow? It could be a spell."

"No," he says. "They stay with me."

Holly stares at him queerly. Quickly concludes a little time apart, right now, will do them all a bit of good. "Don't be silly, Orry. Meet us there. It's not fair to the kids."

The boys cheer.

She is right, of course. Besides, what more can he do without sounding like an idiot? With the cop hovering nearby?

Holly and the kids pile into the police car. "You won't believe it," Holly says, "but the boys have been begging us to stop at this mini-putt for miles."

"Must be fate," says the trooper.

Eyes fixed on Exit 21.

CRICKETS SERENADE AT ROADSIDE. AN ORCHESTRA OF TAMBOURINES, BUT WITHOUT the whack and thump. Strange to hear them so active by daylight.

He watches in the rear-view mirror. Stomach queasy. Mind unsettled.

Reviews the road map. The AAA Tour Guides. The comic books. Steps out to stretch his legs.

Notes the Greyhound on the horizon. A white Honda Civic scurrying behind.

An ideal time to start smoking again. If only he had a pack of anything.

No sign of tow truck.

Sees the Greyhound, closer. Much closer.

Sees the white Honda Civic cutting in front, a car length too soon. Much too soon.

Stands rigid. Tries to throw himself clear. Tries his damndest. Really. Though he has long deserved it. Sees the plaster Chingachgook guarding Fort Bumpo's, elbow bent and fist extended, middle finger pointing insolently upwards. Sees the kids, Holly shepherding them to the ticket booth beneath the coonskin cap, *Welcome Settlers* scripted in red along the tail. Sees the woman at the cash. Short. Pear-shaped. Body flowing in folds over stool. Sees the grin grease her face. Hears her ask: "How long has your father been dead, boys?" •

## **in upcoming issues...**

In upcoming issues of *On Spec*, you'll find new work by NATALKA ROSHAK, KAREN TRAVISS, DAVE KIRTLEY, IAN CREASEY, JULIA HELEN WATTS, PAUL E. MARTENS, CHARLES COLEMAN FINLAY, JAMES VAN PELT, HARRY JAMES CONNELLY, HOLLY PHILLIPS, RANDY D. ASHBURN, BARTH ANDERSON, S.A. BOLICH, ZOË LANDALE, SOBHAN CARROLL, JEAN-CLAUDE DUNYACH, ARI GOLEMAN, KEN RAND, JAMES ALLISON, SUSAN LINVILLE, DAVID YEH, and many more!



*Europa hooked me up with a digital piano—plastic keys feel different than faux ivory—so I could prepare for the heist...*

# The Prodigious Daughter

E.L. Chen

“OF ALL THE GIN JOINTS . . .”

I glanced up from the piano and found Godfrey staring at the door, bottle frozen in mid-pour. One finger of scotch became two, and shortly a whole hand and thumb followed, spilling over the rim of the glass in thin rivulets. The nearest barfly—toothless Ed, who was always requesting Cole Porter—turned away from the network news headlines and whimpered in protest and desire. My own hands shook with want.

The woman who had entered was the iciest blonde this side of a Hitchcock revue, and she walked as if she were eight feet tall and thus literally able to look down her nose at us plebes. Godfrey slammed down the bottle. Ed lunged for the slick glass.

“...she walks into mine.”

“Oh, to hell with cliché,” I muttered, and launched into a spirited interpretation of “As Time Goes By.”

“Europa,” Godfrey said, flatly.

“Don’t flatter yourself.” Her voice was as smooth and cultured as a pearl. “I’m not here for you. I want to talk to *her*.” She pointed a mani-

cured nail in my humble direction.

"While you're there, would you mind bringing over a gin and tonic?" I called out, seizing the opportunity to still my trembling hands. "Hold the tonic, by the way."

Godfrey shot me an appreciative smile and poured the drink with one hand, the show-off. The woman snatched it from him and stalked over to the battered upright. Her cornsilk yellow suede pumps halted to one side of my stool.

"Thanks." I took the drink in my left hand and continued playing with my right. I drained the glass, handed it back to her, and finished the song with a lively flourish.

"Miss Lee," she said.

"The name's Samantha." I flashed her a cocky grin and started playing "The Lady is a Tramp."

She was older than I was, either a tired thirty, a healthy forty, or a face-lifted fifty. She was stunning rather than pretty because of the hardness in her hazel eyes. She was, in the Victorian sense, not amused.

"Samantha, if you would please give me your full attention, I have a proposition that may interest you."

I turned my head toward her without fumbling a single insolent note. "I can play blindfolded." A statement, not a boast. If I'd wanted to boast, I would've told her that I could play with untreated second-degree burns.

"I suppose that is one of the reasons why I found you in the first place," she said, more to herself than to me. "I need someone with your precise skills."

"What, did Godfrey tell you I'm a cheap drunk?"

The elegant crow's-feet at the corners of her eyes twitched. "Do you dislike an Elliott Pollard as much as I do?"

The song dissolved into dissonant chords. She snapped open her clutch purse—cut from the same pastel-yellow cow as her shoes—and said, "Do you mind if I smoke?"

"Lady, this place is so smoky that the Surgeon-General slapped a warning label on the front door. I chain-smoke two packs a day, second-handedly." I tilted my head, indicating the regulars. Godfrey's was one of the last bars in the city where you could legally light up indoors.

She extracted a pack of smokes and lit one with an expensive-looking gold lighter. A sweet scent unfurled, stinging my eyes. My jaw locked and I fought the urge to stretch the wrists of my sweater over my knuckles. I should've asked her to bring over the whole bottle of gin.

"I need help accessing Pollard's personal files." Smoke puffed from her exquisitely symmetrical nostrils.

My jaw unclenched; they were menthol cigarettes, not clove. "Computer-hacking and safe-cracking are a bit out of my league. You've got the wrong pianist."

"This computer has a very unique keyboard."

"Unless the keys are black and white and made of faux ivory, I'm not interested."

She really had cold, knowing smiles down to an art. It began as taut pressure at the center of her rosebud mouth, and spread languorously to the corners.

"Oh hell. They are, aren't they?"

"Plastic, actually."

"No faux elephants harmed in its making, huh?"

I suddenly realized that I'd played the chorus three times in succession. I switched to "Let's Do It."

"What's in it for me?" I said.

"I can get anything you want. *Anything.*"

"Really? How about another drink?"

She signaled to a waiter, who came over and refilled my glass.

"Wow, you really can get what I want."

"Try me."

My hands slipped off the keys in mid-phrase. They were shaking again. I tipped the contents of the glass down my parched throat.

"I want my mother," I said.

She crossed her arms, waiting.

"And that's all I want. You can keep your money or whatever else you had in mind."

She doused her cigarette in the remains of my gin. Taking the glass from my hand, she said in that maddeningly polished voice, "I'll be in touch."

She strutted to the bar, deposited the glass in front of Godfrey, blew a kiss toward his scowling face, and left as arrogantly as she'd entered. He poured me a fresh drink—bourbon, this time—and brought it over.

"Quite a piece of work," he said.

I nodded but said nothing, adjusting electronic sheet music that I'd never used. The notes danced before my eyes as the electronink stuttered from pixel to pixel. "Smooth Sailing" jitterbugged into "Rough Riding." I swear that stuff has a sense of humor.

"What did she want with you?"

I shrugged.

"Whatever it is, you be careful. She's married to Archibald Sand. Sand Towers, Sand Castle—they own everything in town. I read on the net-



work that they just invested in Pollard Studios, bringin' it out of the red—and Elliott Pollard was millions of dollars in debt.”

I made a face at the mention of my stepfather's name—and not just because of the bubblegum-sweet pop songs his studio put out on the network. “Well, la-di-freakin'-da. But I bet that after she blows her nose she looks at the tissue like the rest of us.”

“I'm serious. If you even look at her the wrong way—or wear white after Labour Day or somethin'—she can screw with your life with a twist of her pinky. How do you think I ended up workin' here?”

“Exactly,” I said. “How could it get worse than this? Cheers.” The bourbon scorched my throat. I grinned and started to play “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?”

Ed raised his glass in salute.

EUROPA HOOKED ME UP WITH A DIGITAL PIANO—PLASTIC KEYS FEEL DIFFERENT THAN faux ivory—so I could prepare for the heist. A couple of burly men in coveralls appeared at my door during my day off and set up the heavy keyboard.

Deliciously weighted keys, *una* and *tre corde* pedals, all fuelled by a jumble of wires. I spent an hour playing chords, learning the keyboard's tension and letting the pure sounds reverberate inside my tiny apartment.

Europa showed up after the sun had set, cigarette smoldering from between pale fingers. I pulled on my cardigan to cover my arms and let her in. I wondered how she'd gotten to my neighborhood; cars were only allowed through during rush hours, and I couldn't imagine her walking all the way from her penthouse suite in the Sand Castle. I didn't ask, though. It would've given her the right to ask things about me.

The single room was just large enough to hold a kitchenette, box-spring mattress, network screen and pay console, and a three-and-a-half-legged chair that Godfrey had let me have since he'd been about to throw it out. I motioned her toward the chair and found an empty wine bottle to use as an ashtray.

“Drink?”

“Gin and tonic,” she said. “Hold the gin.”

I gave her the only clean glass in the place. She sniffed and drank with small, measured sips. Behind her, the network cycled through countless news bytes and banner ads, begging me to insert quarters for a minute of its time.

I glanced about for a place to rest my shifting feet. My mattress was covered in sheet music—pulp paper, not electronic—and discs to which

I could no longer listen, as I'd sold my disc player months ago to make the rent. The only other flat surface suitable for sitting on was the little folding stool that had come with the piano. I sat, tugged the too-long sleeves of my sweater down to my fingers, and fiddled with the keys.

Europa picked up a disc. I watched her face rather than the cracked case. I knew what the cover looked like anyway: glossy white background and inset photo of a pigtailed, adolescent girl. *Tschaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1*, the title said in bold black typeset, *as performed by Samantha June Lee and the London Philharmonic Orchestra*.

She said, "I thought you preferred jazz."

I dug another disc from the pile and handed it to her. Same little girl, different orchestra. Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. I pushed down the memory with the rejected gin from Europa's drink.

"I attended your last concert, you know. With Godfrey."

Her words transported me to my own past before I could notice the mention of Godfrey's. Suddenly I was sixteen years old again, clutching a suitcase and waiting anxiously behind Roy Thompson Hall for a taxi, while the audience inside screamed for an encore. While Pollard and my mother jiggled the doorknob of my locked dressing room. I drained my glass to give me strength.

"You were good."

"Of course I was good. I had to be. I mean, who's going to buy a disc when they can pick and choose their favorite songs for the price of a network link?" I took another swig of gin—from the bottle, this time—and picked out the melody of "But Not For Me."

"Even if you can get network distribution, the studio takes a huge cut. But there's money to be made if you're the next Paganini or Caruso."

"Or Lee."

"Ha. I never saw any of that money. My stepfather wrung me dry of every penny. How do you think he could afford to set up Pollard Studios?" "But Not For Me" modulated into "Nice Work If You Can Get It."

"So where's my mother?" I said. "Pollard Studios won't tell me."

Europa dropped the disc back on the bed. "I'll inform you when you fulfill your end of the bargain. Tell me, what will you do when you find her?"

I said nothing. My hands moved restlessly over the keyboard. They stretched into chords and shuddered until they found the familiar melody of "My Heart Belongs to Daddy."

"Astounding, isn't it?" she said.

"Sure, if you like Cole Porter."

"No. Music itself. Each pitch is simply a frequency. A sound wave. A

song is nothing more than frequency over time.”

I livened up my performance to reassure myself that at least *I* didn’t think of music in terms of high school physics.

“Whereas computer code is digital. Binary. Using ones and zeroes to represent electrical impulses—or the lack of.”

“Like dots and dashes?” My left hand tapped out an S.O.S.—in swing time, of course.

“Exactly. At the turn of the century, people realized that computers would eventually reach their limits. Code was too long, too complicated, the speed of electrical impulses limited.”

“I didn’t think you’d be interested in this high-tech stuff,” I said.

“I’m not. I’m interested in Elliott Pollard.” She touched a French manicured hand to her stomach, briefly, as if remembering something that had happened there. A scar, or bruised kidney? An unborn child? Or maybe she had pre-menstrual cramps. “Didn’t you or your mother wonder about his past?”

I shrugged. “He was highly recommended. That was enough for my mother.” She’d married the bastard, after all.

“He was a former piano prodigy, like yourself.” Stabbing out her cigarette, Europa said, “After he tired of the concert circuit, he decided that there were more lucrative opportunities for a man of his stature. He entered the business world—consulting on multimedia start-ups, adding prestige to boards of directors, convincing investors to open their wallets for futurist ventures. One of his pet projects envisioned computers that used the universal language of music. Frequency over time providing countless variables and channels. The project interested the Japanese; they like anything with art in it.” She spoke with disdain, as if art were a bad thing, a word distasteful to her pedigreed mouth.

“Once he had corporate backing, he had a prototype made.”

She paused to light a fresh cigarette.

“It was received as an embarrassing liability. It was too visionary, too ambitious.”

I snorted. “That’s Pollard for you.”

“He did not account for human error. It’s natural for the average pianist to make mistakes.”

“Except Elliott isn’t an average pianist.”

“Neither are you.” She tapped her cigarette over the wine bottle and continued, “He used this individuality to his advantage, however, as a failsafe security system. Fingerprints and retinas and voicescans can be faked. Code can be cracked. But someone who plays as well as he does—with the same affectations, the same variations, the same skill—nearly

impossible, now that the reign of the individual artist is over. Thanks to the network, today's artists are talentless one-hit wonders—like Pollard's disposable pop protégés—who squeeze all they can out of their fifteen megabytes of fame."

I was silent, save for my fingers at the piano. Then:

"Security?"

"Pollard Studios' head office is in Sand Towers—what do you think?"

"Fingerprints? I can't play wearing gloves." God knows I'd tried.

She fished a tube of a popular male contraceptive out of her purse.

"Latex gel. Dries like a second skin, or so the ad campaign claims."

"Can I ask—what do *you* have against Pollard?"

She touched her stomach again and said, "He has some information about me that I'd rather he didn't have."

"Blackmail?"

She nodded.

"Stupid crime," I said. "The victim ends up broke and desperate and out for blood. But he always was a cocky S.O.B. Thought he could get away with anything." The cuffs of my sweater hiked up around my wrists. I yanked them back down and took another swig from the gin bottle.

She raised an impeccably groomed eyebrow. I couldn't tell if they were natural or filled in with eyeliner. "I assure you that I am neither broke nor desperate. But I am definitely out for blood."

"Revenge, huh?"

The crow's-feet in the corners of her hazel eyes tensed. Then, to my amazement, they quivered. "Don't be so crude. I simply want to be left alone. You can understand that."

I thought back to my childhood—despite the gin—and became more frightened of Europa than I had ever been. Because I did understand.

COPS. OR FUGITIVES LYING LOW. AROUND HERE BOTH HAD AN AIR OF TIRED desperation. As the three men entered, I resisted the urge to play "Send in the Clowns." Instead I settled for "Too Darn Hot" and wished I had legs like Ann Miller's. Ed raised his glass and waggled his eyebrows. He was probably wishing the same thing.

Two of the men secured a table, ordered a pitcher and a basket of soy fries, and pretended to be interested in the sports highlights shuffling on the network. I noticed some of the regulars hastily gesturing for their bills; no hardened criminal on his last legs ever orders the soy fries.

The third man sauntered toward the blinking restroom sign—the electronink pixels had a tendency to spell *GITS* instead of *GENTS*—but stopped by the piano to flash his identification.



Detective Gary Marcello. Cute in a hulking kind of way, and about three hairs away from a monobrow. A face folded from origami sandpaper: all stubble and sharp lines, angles, and planes.

"We hear you've been running in strange circles," he said.

"Genetic disorder."

"Word on the street is that you're thick as thieves with Europa Sand."

"Too Darn Hot" melted into an indignant "Well, Did You Evah?"

"What exactly are you accusing me of?" I said.

"We're not accusing you of anything."

"Yet." I snorted.

"We just want to take you down to the station for questioning."

I pouted and made the transition to "Don't Fence Me In."

"Think you're cute, don't you?"

"Detective," I said, "I'm performing a Porter medley for a fan." I indicated Ed with a twist of my neck. Ed saluted me again and fell off his stool.

I turned back to Marcello and said, "Well, since you don't like Porter, do you have any requests?"

"Come down to the station with us."

"Sorry, don't know that one. Is it Gershwin?"

I eschewed Porter in favor of "Too Close For Comfort." I interpreted it as faithfully as I could to Mel Tormé's vigorously suave rendition. Marcello interpreted it as a sign of guilt. He snapped a handcuff over my left wrist and jerked me to my feet.

"I'm flattered," I said, "but you haven't even bought me a drink yet."

He swiped a shot of tequila from a passing waiter. I downed it with a single gulp.

"Thanks," I said. "Now we can go."

THE POLICE INTERROGATION ROOM WAS LOW-CEILINGED AND PAINTED A PEELING oatmeal gray. The overhead lights had all burned out, so a desk lamp illuminated the long folding table and two hard-backed chairs that stood on the painted concrete floor.

It made my apartment look like a suite at the Sand Castle. In short, it was everything a police interrogation room should be, except that the one-way glass window I'd expected was completely transparent. Outside, Marcello's co-workers peered at me as if I were a creature in a menagerie. I fiddled with the sleeves of my sweater and wondered if the station's cafeteria was licensed. It had been a long time since anyone had treated me like a circus act.

Marcello got right to business once I took a seat. "Spill it," he growled,

kicking aside the other chair. "What does Europa Sand want with you?"

I crossed my legs, smoothed down my skirt, and said, "She's planning some functions and heard I was available."

"What kind of functions?"

"I don't know. Garden parties, charity brunches, whatever her cold little heart desires." I frowned. Something was off, and I couldn't put my finger on it until he nudged the lamp's shining cone into my eyes. "Hey—aren't I entitled to a 'good' cop?"

"With the new budget, we can only afford bad ones." He placed his hands palms-down on the table and leaned so far over that I could've plucked the straggly hairs from between his eyebrows. "So you'd better squeal, sister."

I snorted and decided to fight cliché with cliché. "What are you going to do? Torture me? If Mrs. *Archibald* Sand finds out you've detained the star of her show, your ass will be suspended faster than you can say 'Amnesty International.'"

For additional dramatic effect—inspired by a classic Sharon Stone movie—I uncrossed my legs, hiked up my skirt, and exposed a pair of slim thighs blistered with old burn scars. The back of my mind noted with relief that I'd worn clean underwear.

"You can't hurt me," I said. *More than I've already been hurt.*

"I see. If you'll excuse me..." He pulled out the smallest handheld I'd ever seen from his pocket and yanked out the earbuds. He pressed a button and jacked up the volume before exiting the room, leaving me with sweat beaded on my forehead and my hands clenched into trembling fists.

A Mozart sonata, candy-coated homophonic G-major sweetness.

The bastard.

I didn't crack. But oh, how I wanted to.

EUROPA LAUGHED—THE FIRST TIME I'D HEARD HER DO SO—WHEN I TOLD HER about Marcello's interrogation. She'd been waiting for me outside my apartment, tapping a roll of blueprints against the palm of her hand. Cigarette butts lay crushed at her feet like defeated foes.

I let her inside. "Let's just say," she said, flicking cigarette ashes into a sticky schnapps bottle, "that the police don't know the half of what Polard has on me. Don't concern yourself with Marcello."

"Easy for you to say. You didn't have to listen to Mozart for an hour." My hands were still trembling. I soothed them by curling my fingers around a fresh bottle of scotch.

Europa plucked a disc off of my mattress. Saint-Saëns' *Carnival of the*

*Animals*. I shivered.

"Why did you leave?" she asked, tracing my photo with a sculpted fingernail.

"What else can you do when you're in an abusive relationship?" I said, hoping that she'd touch her stomach again, or at least reveal some wound that would make us equally vulnerable.

She smiled one of her cold, knowing, impenetrable smiles and took another drag of her cigarette.

"A bad love affair with music," I said. Or perhaps it was the scotch talking. "Caused me nothing but bitterness and yet I kept crawling back for more. Had enough love, hate, and misery in those sixteen years for a Romantic opera." My left hand picked out a mocking "Just One of Those Things" on the digital keyboard, while I brought the scotch to my mouth with my right. The cuffs of my cardigan drooped below my wrists; I didn't push them back.

Europa smiled again, saying nothing.

I dropped the bottle. Alcohol splashed onto the warped hardwood and seeped into the sheet music scattered by my bed.

"Is *this* what you're waiting for?" I said, pushing up my sleeves. "Did you want to know if Pollard hurt me as much as he hurt you?"

Her face paled as she saw the lace of mottled burn scars on my arms. I could almost smell the spicy scent of my mother's clove cigarettes against my flesh.

"*This* is why I was so good."

"Pollard?" she asked, surprised.

"My mother. Pollard told her that I should practice without distraction. *Despite* distraction. Because no one was going to pay to see me screw up."

Behind Europa, the network taunted me with promises of insurance deals, the hottest new pop songs, and amateur porn. I would've switched it off if I could, but its presence subsidized the rent in my building.

"*This* is why I don't play classical anymore."

"Is your mother responsible for those, too?"

She pointed to the long, thin welts that ran along the inside of my forearms.

"No. Those were me. Turns out I'm not so good at something after all."

I was about to roll down my sleeves and fish the last drops of scotch from the bottle when I realized that Europa was still staring at my scars. She'd raised a hand as though to freeze me in position while she studied them. For an awkward second I thought she was going to touch me. Like

the hard-boiled crime fiction of homophobic yestercentury in which the bad guy is made more sinister by his sexual orientation.

But Europa wasn't the bad guy—Elliott Pollard was. And even if we had been attracted to each other, neither of us liked to be touched. My scars attested to that. And I was sure that Europa's—wherever they were—did too.

"Why didn't you go through with it? Why are you still alive?" she asked, finally. Her voice was sincere, curious, almost wistful. She really wanted to know, as if it were a secret that had eluded her all her life.

"Habit, I guess. I don't like tequila, but I still drink it. Why are *you* still alive?"

"Get me those files, Samantha." She stubbed out her cigarette and stood up.

"Was it something I said?" I slurred, following her to the door. "Did my little sob story upset you? Don't fret your pretty little head about me, Ms. Sand. Music's not to blame. We've learned to live together during my exile. Pollard's the one who's going to pay. And my mother."

Her eyes snapped up to meet mine. "Revenge, huh?"

"Don't be so crude. I simply want to be left alone. You can understand that."

"You're drunk."

"And you're not," I said. "Which I bet is the real tragedy of your tortured life."

"Good night, Samantha."

Her mouth curled once, and then she was gone. I could've sworn that her smile remained.

IT WAS THE PERFECT HEIST. EUROPA HAD ALL THE KEYS SITTING IN THE PALM OF HER hand—Elliott Pollard, her husband, myself, all the nefarious connections she'd accumulated over the years—and all she had to do was turn them with a flick of her fine-boned wrist.

I found myself dressed in black—the uniform of cat burglars and concert pianists—the next night. The nineteenth floor of Sand Towers was as deserted as Europa had promised and the glass door to Pollard Studios darkened. I punched the security code into the keypad, trusting that her information was correct. She could get anything one wanted, after all. Anything.

Once inside, I stole past the receptionist's desk—twenty paces forward—toward the gleam of a doorknob. The executive office was locked. I pulled out another item from Europa's bag of tricks: a cardkey. The electronink display above the door handle flashed green and then the



shuffling pixels invited me to enter in a dozen different languages.

Eight paces forward, three to the right. At first touch, the piano keyboard seemed to be a music executive's toy, something on which to work out choruses and codas. A second touch told me that it was clumsier and heavier than the one Europa had lent me, and thus older.

It was wireless, nonetheless; I had to fumble in the dark for the desktop computer whose secrets it would reveal. I found the power switch, pressed it and heard the computer whine. The screen flickered. I dimmed the display in case a security guard somehow slipped out of Europa's control.

Rubbing my palms together, I felt as if I were four years old and preparing for my first recital. I had to warm my hands, but not to the point of sweatiness. Warm, flexible, sure and dry. Fingernails clipped to the quick. Wrists locked. I flexed my fingers and felt the joints crack.

I bit down hard on my lip, tasted the sting of blood and pain, and began to play. Chopin's *Heroic Polonaise*. I played it the way I knew Polard would—with exaggerated flourish, aggressiveness, cockiness—the way he had taught me to play it. The way he had taught me to play everything. He and my mother would've been proud.

The keyboard was silent save for the clicking of depressed plastic. But I heard every note.

I SPENT THE REST OF THE NIGHT BACK AT MY APARTMENT WITH EUROPA, LISTENING to rattling ice cubes and the clink of wet glasses. We'd opened my last bottle of scotch to celebrate.

"It's time that I held up my end of the bargain." She pulled a cardkey from her purse. I pocketed it without looking at the address scribbled on its side.

"With a bonus for a job well done." A small, black rectangular object followed. I had no idea what it was until she produce its companion.

"Pay attention. This is the safety, this is the trigger. Load—" *Click*. "—unload." *Click*. "Point—and shoot." *Click*.

She laid the gun on the mattress. I picked it up, gingerly, as if it were a newborn baby. It was heavy in my hand. I liked the security of having my fingers curled around it.

She got to her feet and said, "Goodbye, Samantha. Keep the piano. And keep the gun. I already have one."

"I told you that all I wanted was my mother," I said, pulling my cardigan tighter around myself. "No money, or whatever else you had in mind."

Her rosebud lips pressed into a thin, slightly curved line. I could tell from the change in her breathing that she was about to be very, very

cruel.

*Oh God, I thought. Don't say it. Don't—*

"You know," she said, "you remind me of myself when I was your age."

*Shit.*

THEY CAME FOR ME TWO DAYS LATER, AT THE END OF "ILL WIND." EUROPA'S BODY had been found. Single bullet wound to the head and an automatic cradled in her pale hand, according to the network news headlines. No suicide note, but I'd doubted that she'd leave one. She'd had everything she'd wanted before she died.

A related headline had caught my eye: all Sand money had been pulled out of Pollard Studios. I'd dug some quarters out from under my mattress and had fed them into the network console. This dramatic action had been requested in Europa's will. Pollard's lawyers were contesting her wishes, of course, and the article anticipated the long and dirty legal battle with glee.

At Godfrey's, I managed a few bars of "It Ain't Necessarily So" before Marcello snapped his cuffs on me—this time on both wrists.

I WAS FLATTERED THAT I'D BEEN DEEMED IMPORTANT ENOUGH TO WARRANT THE department's splurge on a good cop. He was a tall, pleasant-faced man who let Marcello have a crack at me first. When I appeared sufficiently cowed, he closed in for the kill.

"I apologize for his behavior," he said, "but it would be a lot easier for you if you just told us everything you know."

"Suicide," I said.

"How do you know?" Marcello said, slamming his hands down on the folding table. "Forensics hasn't finished yet."

I shrugged. *Because I understand how badly she wanted to be left alone.*

"You gotta do better than that."

"Did it ever occur to you that I have an alibi?"

His jaw dropped. "Don't tell me—you were working at Godfrey's."

I gave him a sheepish smile.

The good cop struggled to maintain his amiable expression. "Why didn't you say so before?"

"Couldn't get a word in edgewise while Detective Marcello was yelling."

"We can still get you for B 'n' E," said Marcello.

The good cop caught his eye and shook his head. Marcello punched the wall and swore in an unrecognizable European language. But he unlocked my handcuffs.

"My hero," I said. I kissed him on one livid, sandpapery cheek. His stubble re-opened the cut on my lip. I started for the exit, humming "Dont'cha Go 'Way Mad."

He thumbed away the spot of blood I'd left on his face and said, "Take care of yourself. I don't ever want to see you in here again."

"Sure. Just have to take care of something else, first."

I blew him a second kiss and walked out the door.

IT WAS THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT BUT I HAD NO REASON TO BE CONCERNED. The suburban gated community, whose bored security guard had let me enter for a generous bribe, was crime-free. Europa's cardkey granted me entry through Elliott Pollard's front door and into the past, as I searched for the woman who had expected me to be grateful for her abuse.

The foyer held a baby grand piano, under which boxes and crates stored mementos that had yet to be unpacked. I recognized the trophies that spilled out onto the marble floor. Framed sheets of electronic paper leaned against the wall, their pixels twinkling as they offered a slideshow of certificates, photos, concert tour posters, and reviews. This was no shrine to a missing child—it was a room waiting for its occupant. I fought off a wave of nausea as I realized why she had never tried to find me.

She'd assumed that I'd crawl back on my own.

I crept up the stairs. She was in the master bedroom, alone; the network had said that Pollard was haggling with Archibald Sand's lawyers in the city.

"Hello, Hermione," I said.

I stood motionless for a few seconds before she stirred.

"Sami June?" she said, rubbing her eyes. "What on earth are you doing here?"

"Settling old debts."

"Well," she drawled, easing herself into a sitting position. "The prodigal returns. How long has it been? Nine, ten years?" She reached over to the bedside table and extracted a cigarette from a silver case. The scent of cloves filled the room. I fought off another wave of nausea and balled the cuffs of my sweater in my palms to protect my wrists and fingers.

"It's about time you realized how lucky you are to have parents like me and Elliott." She inhaled, the breath bringing her to her full height. She transformed into the monster of my childhood, tall and upright, a menacing creature of proud bearing and sure features. A creature who had flicked cigarette ashes in my eyes and had let Pollard exploit a child.

I raised the gun that Europa had given me until the faint light from the window hit it.

The monster shuddered once and deflated. As I'd suspected, all those years I'd feared an illusion, a trick of light and shadows.

She whimpered. "You wouldn't."

"Try me."

Point—and shoot.

*Click.*

"So long, Hermione."

"You're not going to kill me?"

"I got what I came here for," I said, tossing the unloaded gun on the bed.

Back at the hotel, I shoved the bar's pianist aside and performed three of Bach's thirty-two *Goldberg Variations*, without breaking open my healing lip, before security came and dragged me off to my room.

A COOL, PLEASANT EVENING—NOT THAT IT MATTERED TO ME SINCE I WAS INDOORS breathing cigarette and alcohol fumes. Godfrey tending bar, Ed clinging to consciousness, and the usual assortment of ne'er-do-wells, myself included. I played "Lush Life" with cocky enthusiasm and sipped gin and tonic—hold the gin—whenever I had a free hand.

I no longer craved the vices that would have sent me down Europa's self-destructive path. So I was a little alarmed when Detective Marcello entered, his origami sandpaper face set at unfamiliar angles. Then I realized that he was smiling.

He grabbed a pint from Godfrey and made his way to my corner. "Hardly recognized you, Detective," I said.

"You look different yourself. Do somethin' with your hair?"

"Wearing short sleeves in public for the first time in years," I said, showing him my bare arms.

"Hate to see the other guy," was all he said. I almost liked him right then.

"And I'm nine days sober, and counting." I clinked my glass against his. "Cheers. This is just tonic water. Godfrey says it'll help with the oral fixation."

"Maybe you should take up smoking."

"Think you're cute, don't you?" I grinned and played "Don't Get Around Much Anymore," a light, tinkling rendition worthy of a Sunday afternoon.

"That was good," Marcello said when I'd finished. "Reminded me of Art Tatum."

He eyed me over his raised pint.

"No way," I said. "Call me Sam, and it'll be nothing but Gilbert and Sul-



livan till last call."

Ed choked and sprayed scotch all over the bar. Marcello raised his conjoined eyebrows.

"Oh, all right," I said. "But you do know it's a misquote, don't you?"

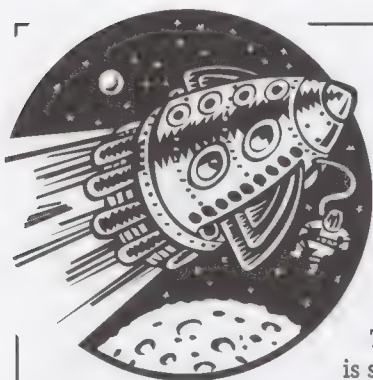
"Don't matter. Play it again, Sam."

I groaned, and played it again.

"You know," he said, "I think this is the beginning of—"

*"Don't say it."*

But he did. •



## Science Fiction Deposit Research Collection at the University of Alberta Library

The University of Alberta Library is soliciting donations to its recently established Science Fiction Deposit Research Collection to create a still larger, publicly accessible, research collection of regional and national significance, similar to that of Toronto's Merrill Collection of Science Fiction, Speculation and Fantasy. Science fiction and fantasy novels, journals, pulp magazines, archives, and ephemera, as well as UFOlogy are being sought. Donations are eligible for tax receipts for their appraised value.

For further information about the collection and donation procedures contact:

Merrill Distad  
at (780) 492-1429  
(merrill.distad@ualberta.ca)

or

Randy Reichardt  
at (780) 492-7911  
(randy.reichardt@ualberta.ca).

*In a small town where everyone knows everything about you, any secret is tantalizing. A hint of scandal is rich...*

# All A Woman Needs

Catherine MacLeod

YOU COULDN'T SAY NOBODY WANTED HER. THAT WAS THE MOST important thing. Somebody wanted Reeny Harris and folks knew it, even if they didn't know who or why. The guesswork pleased her no end.

It's not easy keeping a secret in a goldfish bowl.

She said, "You going to be here Monday?"

Gail said, "Where else would I be?"

Reeny let the sarcasm go. It was a valid question. She followed the other waitress into what Gail called the employees' lounge—a mop closet with a hamper and a chair—and took off her apron.

Gail lit a cigarette. "You going home?"

"Can't get there fast enough." Or, she thought, might not get there at all. That was bound to happen one of these days.

Gail narrowed her eyes, not against the smoke. Reeny knew that look—part curiosity, part contempt. "Why?" Gail said. "What've you got planned?"

"Got nothing planned. Got plenty to do, though." She took Jack's old sweater off the coat hook, fished the truck keys from its pocket and slipped it on. She shoved the sleeves up to her elbows. "See you Monday," she said, and closed the door on Gail's next question, whatever it was. There would *be* one, she knew. Reeny stepped back as two women came

out of the ladies' room. She knew them both, but didn't speak—they hadn't seen her and she was too tired for chitchat.

"Did you see that silly smile Irene Harris wore all evening? What's she got to smile about, I'd like to know."

Reeny's mouth fell open. She was ten feet behind them, in plain sight if they bothered to look.

"I'll bet she's fooling around on Jack."

"Uh huh. Imagine grinning like that. Who does she think she is, the Mona Lisa?"

"Well, you know what they say about that."

"No, what?"

"Yes," Reeny said, "what *do* they say?"

It was a Kodak moment. Reeny gave them her best annoying smile and stepped between them into the diningroom.

She called, "Night, Ace," through the pickup window. The cook said, "Drive careful," and she was in the parking lot, grateful for the cool night wind. A.C. Morgan's truck stop was clean and the food good, but after eight hours the smell of hamburgers wore. She headed for her quarter-ton. Her hips swung just a little.

She walked like a woman with a secret.

Reeny let the truck idle, glancing in the rearview. Her reflection looked back. A cap of brown curls framed its oval face, pretty mouth, dark eyes. It was the face of a woman too tired to turn heads, and too old to make men look twice. But it was also the face of a woman singled out and sought after.

You couldn't say nobody wanted her.

The ache in her legs, and between them, wasn't bad tonight. Her back had stopped hurting. She searched her reflection for signs of guilt and found none. That wasn't the face of a woman cheating on her husband. She hadn't asked for this; it wasn't her doing.

But then again, if she was going to be honest, it wasn't her *undoing*, either.

Reeny switched on the radio and got the time, 1:05. She turned up Stevie Nicks and pulled out on the I90, twenty minutes from home.

She arrived at 5:23.

SHE FIGURED SHE COULD SAY SHE'D BEEN RUN OFF THE ROAD; AT SOME TIME OR another both she and Jack had met kids dragging out by Connor's Cross. She could say she'd pulled over rather than fall asleep at the wheel; she'd actually done that once. And she had a shot bottle hidden in the dash. If worst came to worst folks might think she'd started drinking. She had

enough excuses for when she was late getting home. She had them for when she was *very* late.

But she didn't have one for this.

She smoothed salve onto her wrist and slid into bed without waking Jack. She didn't remember it being burned. Maybe it'd been scraped by the restraints—*those* she recalled. Soon there'd be scars she couldn't explain—or wouldn't. She knew what happened to the people who tried. And then what? Reeny really didn't know.

She woke to the sound of hammering at 8:00, and rose with a soft groan and no complaints. She'd gone on less sleep, and even a mystery woman has to do the laundry.

She followed the noise outside and whistled.

"Jack, that's great!"

"You think so?"

"Yeah."

He smiled slowly. The steps he'd built led to a miniature deck at the front door. The railing was wide and solid. He'd used good lumber. He'd done a careful job.

She walked out in her bare feet and hugged him, hard. Her cotton nightgown blew around his legs. She thought of the two women trashing her at the truck stop and grinned. A decent man with a kind heart—some fool *might* cheat on that.

He said, "I'm going to the hardware store. You need anything?"

She did. She bought greenhouse flowers, he got a mower blade, and they drove home talking about the weather and gas prices. She nailed up window boxes while he cut the grass. Dinner was ready when he finished mowing their half-acre.

He said, "I'm going in to work early."

"Be late tonight?"

"Probably."

Reeny nodded. Saturday was a busy night at the garage. He'd be cruising the back roads in the tow truck. One of these nights he'd be coming to get her, one way or another.

She walked him out to his half-ton. She said, "The place looks nice."

"Does, doesn't it?"

She said, "Have a good night, Jack," and smacked a hand on his door.

He said, "What happened to your wrist?"

"I splashed it making fries."

"Bull," Gail said Monday. "Doesn't look like any grease burn to me."

Reeny shrugged and tied her apron. "Hey, Ace, how're you tonight?"

"Can't complain."



"Oh, sure you can."

"Now, Reeny," Gail began, "people are starting to talk about the way you're behaving—"

"Gail," Ace sighed, "why the hell don't you go do some work?" The older woman huffed out. "Actually," he continued, "I *have* heard some stories about you."

"Anything interesting?"

"You seem to be smiling a lot."

"That's it?"

"Pretty much."

"It's a crime?"

"Wasn't the last I heard. Maybe you're just a happy woman."

"Jack built new front steps this morning. He did a beautiful job. Look in the next time you're by."

"Is everything okay?"

"Yes, it is."

"Then we got customers."

REENY HUSTLED THE COUNTER AND THREE SIDE TABLES, SERVING HIGHSCHOOLERS passing time and truckers passing through. She caught Gail glaring at her, and her own reflection in the front window. She nodded approval: she *liked* the smile. She thought, what *do* they say about the Mona Lisa?

She caught the women who thought she was two-timing Jack watching her from Gail's end of the diningroom, and that was fine. In a small town where everyone knows everything about you, any secret is tantalizing. A hint of scandal is *rich*. Reeny knew that the same way she knew their husbands drank too much and their houses needed paint.

"Hey, Reeny, heads up."

"I see him, Ace. Can I take a break?"

"Short one."

She met Jack at the end of the counter. "I was just thinking about you."

"Can I have your truck keys?"

"Sure. Yours quit?"

"No, it's outside. Things're slow tonight, so I have time to do your safety inspection. Won't take long."

"Great. I'll be right back." She got the keys and went into the kitchen. She reached into a high cupboard and got one of the big thermos bottles the truckers sometimes bought for long hauls. She filled it, added cream, and said, "Tips are good tonight—I'll pay for this when I come back."

"You don't have to," Ace said mildly. "Tell Jack I said hi."

She walked her husband out to the parking lot. He thanked her for

the coffee. So happy with the little things, she thought, and kissed his cheek.

"Hey," he protested, "I smell like oil."

"Nah, you smell like honest work."

She watched the tail lights dwindle on up the road. They'd married right out of high school, and he hadn't changed much in twenty years. Each was the only family the other had. He never was a romantic man, but she thought he was all any woman could reasonably ask for, and more than most ever got. He cared for her the best he could, and that was enough. She half-wished she could sit him down and explain what was happening to her, but she honestly didn't know how.

Then again, she might be gone before she had to explain anything at all. She fingered the burn on her wrist as she headed inside. Gail passed her with a pan full of dirty dishes. "Gee, Reeny," she said, "that was *so* touching."

She heard the clatter as Gail slammed the pan down in the kitchen. Ace pushed a cheeseburger platter through the pickup and said, "What's her problem?"

Reeny said, "Beats me," because she couldn't say, *She has no secret and she's mad 'cause I won't tell her mine*. The highlight of Gail's week was bingo at the Legion. Her life was an open book with a well-known plot, and that could put you out of sorts.

He said, "She's been like that all night. I'm glad she's cutting out early."

Gail left an hour later, passing Jack as he came through the door. He tossed Reeny's keys across the room. They jangled in an easy arc and dropped into her hand. She called, "Thanks," as he left.

"Nice catch."

"The keys or the guy?" Her customer was a regular, fond of Reeny's manner and Ace's pie. "What can I get you?"

"What've you got?"

"Apple, lemon, peanut butter..."

IT WAS THE LAST ORDER OF HER SHIFT. SHE LEFT WITH SORE FEET AND SIXTY dollars in tips—a good night, all told. She leaned on the truck hood a moment, stretching her back, clearing her head, waving as a four-door full of teenagers pulled out. She heard them hooting far up the road, and laughed to herself. They were looking for a place, she guessed; somewhere to watch the lights in the sky and each other's eyes.

*Been there, she thought. Done that for sure.*

She rolled out behind them, wanting to be home. Eight hours of sleep sounded good. There was nothing like not having something to make

you appreciate its fine points. She had the radio up and the gas down when headlights flickered out of the side road at Connor's Cross.

Cop car, she thought, slowing. Who else would be sitting with their lights off on some cow path? Though they didn't usually sit on that one—every teen in the county would be looking for them. She checked the rearview. No flashing lights, no siren, no ticket. She hit the gas again.

The car behind sped up.

Something fluttered in Reeny's gut. She considered the feeling. She'd read somewhere that paranoia was a problem for people like her; but she'd also read the line some brain had left on Ace's bathroom wall:

*Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you.*

These last few months she'd learned a whole new set of warning signs, and mostly she heeded them well. There was nothing strange about a car tailing her on the highway. Except that it stayed just far enough back she couldn't get a good look at it—one small fact that made her very nervous. Around here everybody knew everybody. Who cared if they recognized you?

Someone who meant trouble.

Reeny floored it. Cracked asphalt blurred under the truck. The flutter in her stomach had become a hot stone sitting there. Her skin prickled like static, and she thought again about warning signs. She knew this one well. She had five minutes, tops.

Reeny thought, *Could their timing be any worse?* and then she stopped thinking at all.

Sometimes keeping a secret means thinking on your feet.

She hit the brakes hard and hauled on the wheel. The truck veered over the white line. She prayed nobody was dragging tonight: that wasn't the way she wanted this to end. She doused the lights as the other car shot by, and caught a bare glimpse of an old green hatchback. It took her a second.

Gail.

Reeny heard the brakes squeal just over the hill. Lights still off, she pulled across the road again, into an old logging track that went nowhere now. Tall weeds sprang up around the truck as she killed the engine. She heard the little car come back and cruise past slowly. Reeny stashed her purse and the keys under the passenger seat and got out. Gail would check the other side of the road and keep going, chasing Reeny back toward the truck stop. Well and good—some day that woman's nose was going to get her in big trouble. Tomorrow she was going to be just *full* of questions.

Reeny hiked up the track a way, the itching on her skin just short of

pain. When she saw the circle of pale blue lights hovering through the trees she went into the clearing to wait. They were going to take her one way or another, and she'd learned early that mornings after hurt less when she didn't resist.

JACK CALLED FROM THE LIVINGROOM, "REENY, THAT YOU?"

"Yeah."

She heard him turn down *The X-Files*. He came to the door. "Long night?"

"Very." Her eyes stung, from exhaustion or deceiving Jack she didn't know. The lie came out perfectly. "I met some kids racing at the Cross. I ended up in the woods."

"You okay?"

"Yeah, just shook up."

"Who were they?"

"I didn't see."

"Someone's going to die up there one of these days."

"Tell me about it," she said wearily. She nodded at the TV. "Rerun, right?"

"Right. Mulder's chasing UFOs again."

Reeny winced. "I think I'll sit that one out."

"Sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine."

She took a mug of coffee out on the new steps. The yard was full of fireflies like stars come down to Earth. Steam curled around her face. She wondered how much trouble Gail could cause, and decided not much—she could hardly complain about Reeny being hard to stalk.

Eventually it would all come out: an abduction wasn't the kind of thing you could hide for long. But in the meantime, talking about it was the kind of thing that got you locked up.

Reeny sipped her coffee. The light from the TV made soft shadows through the screen door. She could still smell sawdust. This, she thought, was about as good as it got. She had all the essentials—she was wanted, she was cared for, she had a good place to come home to.

She had a secret.

She granted it wasn't the one she would have chosen, but it was the one she had, and she didn't hurt too much tonight. Now if she knew what they said about the Mona Lisa she'd be set.

Reeny caught herself smiling.

She had everything a woman could need. •





Quite a Pair 36"x36" acrylic/canvas  
Grant Leier ©1998

## About our cover artist

### Grant Leier

BORN IN LLOYDMINSTER, SASKATCHEWAN, IN 1956, GRANT LEIER studied at the Alberta College of Art in Calgary before honing his skills further at the Illustrator's Workshop in New York. As well as studying illustration, Leier is proficient as a painter and is also known for his work with textiles.

Leier has had numerous solo exhibitions in Canada and California with paintings as well as textile and assemblages featured in important group exhibitions organized by public art museums. His work is represented in many corporate and private collections including the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, Athabasca University, Public Archives Canada, and Chevron Canada. Leier currently lives and paints in British Columbia. •



William with Fish 15"x32", mixed media on board  
Grant Leier ©1980

*"I'm like a crow, always drawn to the  
brightest and boldest baubles of color."  
— cover artist Grant Leier*

# Quirk express: the whimsy of Grant Leier

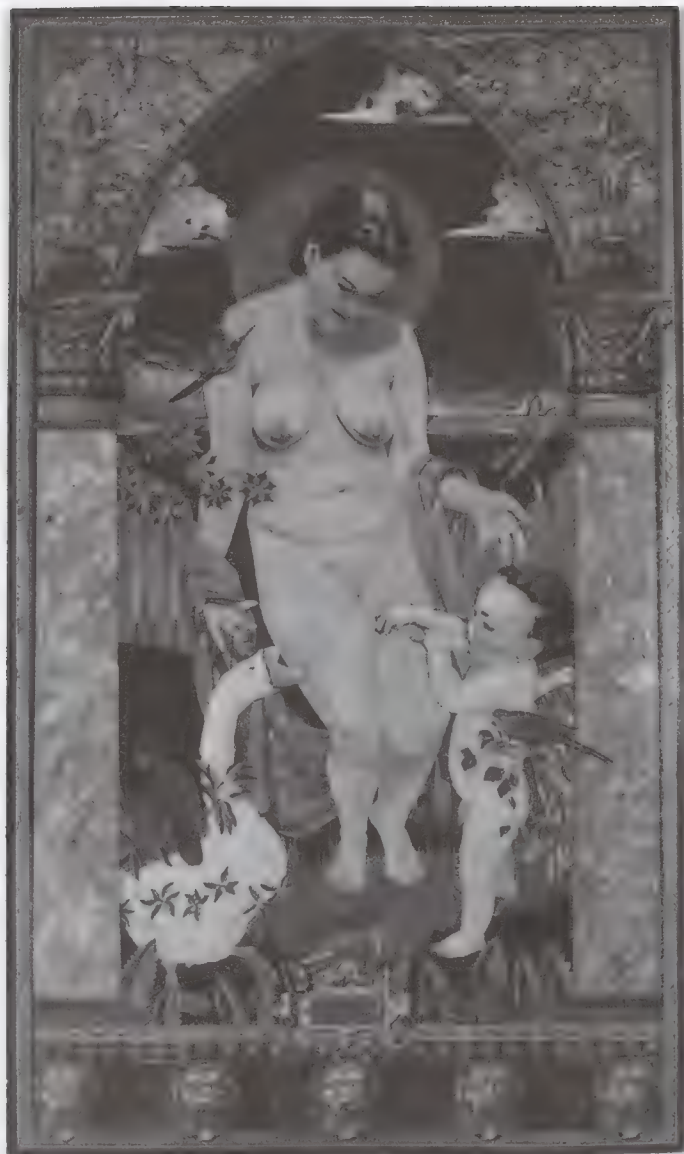
Gordon Snyder

GRANT LEIER ONCE COMPARED HIMSELF TO A CROW WHO IS "always drawn to the brightest and boldest baubles of color." His whimsical and wonderful art works are technically perfect and his sense of design complete. His love of pattern and his proficiency of hand make him a master at illustration. This, a quick wit, and a quirky sense of humor combine to make works that both titillate and excite the viewer.

Combining found objects, odd photographs and other imagery with a symphony of patterns and designs, Leier collages his images and ideas by both painting and drawing them together into a story-like setting. Monkeys or people or even fruit and flowers are intertwined into a world of both fantasy and reality. He takes his everyday life and creates his playful realms full of beautiful colors and forms both for himself and his viewer.

Leier works in bold, bright acrylics with festive and decorative colors, often framing the works with patterns of ornamental designs. The combination of design, bold colors and interesting imagery combine to excite the viewer and cause them to react to the works in a positive and joyful manner. These often sentimental recreations, flamboyant expressions of fabricated realities, can elicit nostalgia in the viewer and sometimes embellish memories of times gone by.

Leier sets the stage, poses the actors, tells his story, and the stage sets are always sublime. •



Charity 23"x39" mixed media on board  
Grant Leier ©1987



*from "Alphabetia," postcards that give  
a whole new meaning to the saying,  
"Don't go there."*

# Ouija

## Catherine MacLeod

BRAD CHECKED THE REARVIEW. DEAD GUY WAS STILL STARING at him. Rick and Patty couldn't even see the ghost.

He needed another beer.

Patty giggled. "Whoever invented the Ouija board should be smacked."

Rick said, "Smack Brad. When the spirits point to goodbye you're supposed to let them go—he kept arguing with them."

"That was funny." Dead Guy didn't look amused.

They stopped at Rick's. He slid out through the ghost. "See you in math class."

A block later Patty said, "You worried about the test?"

"No." Just about living long enough to take it.

He rolled up to Patty's. She kissed him goodnight, hair swinging through the hand stroking it. Dead Guy was leaning on the headrest.

"Mom's on the porch. Gotta go."

"Wait..." To hear what—don't leave me alone with the dead?

She got out and slammed the door. •

*Dawson glanced up at the sea-birds wheeling effortlessly overhead. He had always taken birds for granted...*

# The Path to the Sun

Jaine Fenn

OF COURSE IT WAS A HOAX. IT HAD TO BE.

No doubt both the original telegram and the brightly colored *thing* floating in the cove below were some rustic eccentric's idea of a joke. Dawson was sure he had only been sent on this wild goose chase as revenge for the affair with Alice.

He steadied his bowler hat on his head and leaned forward to speak to the young man who had picked him up from the station. Perhaps the boy could lead him down the cliff to get a closer look at the wretched contraption.

"Sir?"

Dawson turned to meet the intense gaze of a heavily built man with light brown skin, high cheekbones and jet-black hair. He forced his face into a welcoming smile and jumped from the cart. Mud splattered up his trouser leg.

"Mr. ... Ar ... Ahuitzotl, I presume?" Dawson resisted the urge to extend a hand in case the chap took the gesture as some sort of insult. He looked like a U.A.S. citizen all right, just as the telegram had claimed. Maybe there was something to this after all. "I am James Dawson, administrative assistant to Commodore Gordon Cameron, head of the Trans-

portation Research Division in His Majesty's Ministry of War."

"You are Cameron's secretary?" The visitor sounded faintly incredulous, but that might just have been his accent. "The Commodore did not come himself, then."

"Commodore Cameron is an extremely busy man. Your telegram was somewhat...vague, and he had no way of checking your credentials without risking diplomatic complications. If you had come directly to London, he may well have met you in person." And I would not have to stand on this windy cliff-top being insulted by you.

"If I had come to London I would already be dead, Mr. Dawson." The Aztecan spoke calmly, as though his life were not overly important to him, and Dawson found himself looking along the rugged coastline to avoid the visitor's eyes. "However, in the same situation, I also would be cautious. But you are the first representative of the British Government I have encountered since my arrival, so it is to you that I must state my plea."

He paused, then held his hands out in front of him, palms up. He tilted his head towards the sky, closed his eyes, and started to speak, "I am Ahuizotl, child of Acamapichtli of the city of Tetzoco. My Caste is Pochteca, my Clan is Itzconatzin. I have knowledge of the ways of those who were once my enemies, and I have an artifact of those who were once my people. I ask you, James Dawson of London, as a representative of your King, Edward, to grant me sanctuary in this land from now until I die. I offer my fealty and my knowledge, and all material goods that I have brought with me. I renounce citizenship of the Empire of the Sun, which you call the United Aztecan States, in favour of any claims you wish to make on me. On your word, I am reborn."

In the ensuing silence Dawson was acutely aware of water seeping into his shoe, of the heat of the sun, and of how ill-equipped he was to deal with this situation. Damn Cameron for taking Dawson's interest in his niece as a personal insult! But he was stuck with this mission, so he had better try and placate the foreigner. "Er, yes. Well, this is rather outside my jurisdiction, I'm afraid. You really need to speak to someone from the Foreign Office." The Aztecan seemed not to have heard him. He tried speaking up a bit, "Terribly sorry I can't help you, old chap, but there it is."

The Aztecan opened his eyes and shrugged. "I thought you would say something like that." His tone was casual. "No matter. You have heard my request, even if you cannot grant it." He looked past Dawson at the boy on the cart, "Thomas, please secure the cart and accompany us down to the cove. Shall we go, Mr. Dawson?"

"Go where, precisely?"

"To see if I have something worth trading for British citizenship." The Aztecan smiled, and Dawson noticed laughter lines around the man's eyes. He had assumed Ahuizotl was younger than he was, but it seemed he might be slightly older. "Please take care: the path is a little slippery in places."

Dawson followed the Aztecan down the cliff, noting with mild distaste that though the foreigner had adopted European clothes, his hair hung over his collar. "I must say, er, Ahuizotl, I really am quite impressed by your grasp of English. I thought your people rarely learnt other languages." Actually, Whitehall gossip claimed that the U.A.S. ambassador, Nethual ... whatsisname, understood English perfectly well, but still used a translator when he spoke to his hosts. Then again, he also turned up at official functions wearing patterned blankets, animal skins and feathers, regardless of the weather or the potential offence to any ladies present.

"Mr. Dawson, I speak English well because I am Pochteca." Ahuizotl slowed at a switchback in the path. "I am, or rather was, a merchant. You work for the War Ministry so you understand what that means, I assume."

"Ah." Dawson stopped, grabbing a stunted tree for support. "Of course. I see. A... merchant." A spy, rather. It was people like this, as much as their fearsome soldiers, who had allowed the U.A.S. to conquer half a continent.

Ahuizotl looked up at Dawson across the gorse, "I learnt English, and Spanish, in Sierra, where I lived under a false identity between the ages of twenty-four and twenty-nine. I have travelled extensively in Louisiana, New England and Canada. And it is as you think. In my old life I performed acts of espionage and terrorism. But that is *the past*. You must understand that. I have renounced everything: my home, my culture, my nation. I am not who I was." He made a small cutting gesture with his hand and strode off down the path.

Dawson glanced back up the cliff, where sparse white clouds raced over the grassy lip, then released his grip on the tree and scrambled after the Aztecan.

Ahuizotl waited at the base of the path, watching the waves flop and suck across the shingle. He spoke without turning. "I am sorry, Mr. Dawson. If I am to live amongst the English I must do a better job of adopting English ways. I am a little too forward in my speech. Please forgive me."

"Of course." Dawson wondered whether this apparent frankness marked the man as a deceiver of consummate skill, or whether he really was the startlingly honest outsider he appeared to be.



Ahuitzotl swept a hand out to indicate the strange device out in the cove. "Mr. Dawson, may I present to you, and your government, the Cloud Serpent, the only powered flying craft in the world at this time." It had a cylindrical body bisected by a flat plank, which presumably formed the wings; some sort of a box on legs squatted over the point where the wings crossed the body. "Now, if you will follow me, I will prove my claim."

"I'm not entirely sure I understand your intentions here," said Dawson, worried that he did.

"I would like you to fly with me to London."

"Ah, wait a minute, sir. I really don't think I am the man for this. I am no engineer: I would have no way of assessing how well the machine functions."

"Assessing its function is simple enough. Either it flies, or it does not. The fact that I am here implies that it does."

"Yes, of course, but I really..." Dawson found himself taking a step backwards. "Surely you could just take it out for a, well, a fly, while I wait here and watch."

"I understand your unease, but even if you are convinced, you have already told me that you do not have the authority to grant me asylum without consulting your superiors. That will take time. I do not have time."

"So you keep saying. What exactly is the problem?"

"If I turn up in London unannounced and unaccompanied the British authorities will assume this is a trick, as you yourself probably do, and turn me over to the U.A.S. embassy, who will torture and execute me for having betrayed the Empire. If I stay here, the Pochteca will soon find me. I know how effective Aztec foreign agents are. I was one. But if you come with me to London you can intercede for me, if you will."

"And if I chose not to?"

"Then I will ask Thomas to take you back to Penzance and I will fly to London alone, and face the consequences. But, Mr. Dawson, surely this," he gestured at the craft riding the swell of the bay, "is one of the greatest adventures of the age. The chance to fly is not something many are offered. Are you not at least curious?"

"Er, well, of course..." Dawson ran his finger under his collar. Actually, he was terrified. But he could imagine Cameron's face if he turned tail and ran now. "All right, dammit, I'll fly in your infernal machine."

"Good. Very good." Ahuitzotl turned and crunched off over the shingle to where Thomas stood by a rowing boat. Dawson glanced up at the sea-birds wheeling effortlessly overhead. He had always taken birds for

granted.

Dawson addressed the Aztecan's retreating back. "Just make sure your chap sends my overnight bag back to London. I've left it in his cart."

By the time he reached the boat the boy had taken his place on the rower's bench and the Aztecan was seated in the prow. "I'm sorry to presume, Mr. Dawson, but would you be so kind as to push the boat off?"

After a brief hesitation, Dawson did as Ahuizotl asked, even though it left him soaked to the knees. He could always make an expenses claim for a new pair of shoes when he returned to London.

Thomas started rowing with long confident strokes, his cheap jacket pulling taut across his shoulders as he tugged on the oars. On his far side, Ahuizotl shifted slightly to keep eye contact with Dawson. "I imagine you have a few questions, Mr. Dawson. Please, ask what you will."

Dawson thought of all the questions he could ask. There was little to be gained from entering any sort of verbal duel with the Aztecan, but neither did he want to miss the chance for information gathering. He needed something harmless to get the man talking. He looked past the foreigner at the brightly painted machine, then said, "Well, I can't help wondering... why is your craft green? It's a little garish, don't you think?"

"Because green is the color of beings who fly. What other color would we paint a flying machine?" At that moment they rowed out of the shadow of the cliff, and Dawson, squinting at the Aztecan, thought he saw a quick smile.

So much for useful information. "I must say that is precisely the sort of answer I would expect from one of your people! One might almost be think you were mocking me, sir."

"The Azteca are no longer my people. And I am not mocking you. Please allow me to explain. Green is the color which signifies flight, escape. For the Children of the Sun, color, place, and time are not matters of chance or whim: they are ciphers, symbols of what we cannot hope to otherwise comprehend. An expression of cosmic order, if you like. I was smiling because I know how strange such ideas must seem to you. If I was mocking anyone, it was myself for being fool enough to think I could cross the gap between two cultures as easily as crossing an ocean. Yet here I am." He spread his arms, as though encompassing the sky and the cliffs, then favoured Dawson with a direct stare. "Do you know who Hernan Cortes was, Mr. Dawson?"

"Cortes? Er, no, never heard of him." The flying machine's growing presence beyond the Aztecan's shoulder was becoming distracting.

"No, I would not expect you to. He was a Spanish criminal who fled

to the mainland from the Carib islands to avoid a death sentence. He was the first European to see Tenochtitlan, the heart of the Empire. He came with men and horses and guns, and he tried to abuse an ancient prophecy to gain power. Emperor Cuitlahuac saw him for what he was: a lesson from the gods that the outside world would destroy us if it could. I suspect his late brother, Moctezuma, would not have been so wise. It would be heresy for me to say this in the Empire, but if the Azteca not acquired gunpowder and horses from Cortes the Empire would not have lasted four of your decades, let alone four centuries. Technology is power."

"And what happened to this Cortes chap?" Dawson found his gaze drawn to the Cloud Serpent. It looked somewhat flimsy. Wires were strung between every surface, and the only substantial part was the box in the centre, a complicated affair of greasy metal with some sort of wooden bar fixed across the back of it.

"What do *you* think happened to him?"

Dawson tore his gaze away from the flying machine. "I would prefer not to speculate."

"All power, Mr. Dawson, is in the heart. So Cuitlahuac ate his heart. We have a national holiday to celebrate the event."

"Charming." Dawson glanced at Thomas. His neutral expression was a credit to his class.

They were pulling alongside one of the wings; a pontoon on the wing-tip dipped down to the water to keep the craft steady and stable. Ahuitzotl reached out and ran his fingertips absently along the edge of the wing. "Cortes was a European, yet most Europeans have not heard of him. To the Azteca, he is, well, not a hero, but a celebrity. What I am saying is the differences between the two cultures are merely a matter of perspective. What is that quote? 'History is written by the victors.' We see the world as we are told to see it, because that is the path of least resistance. For the Azteca this occurs to a degree you would find hard to comprehend." The boat came round to nestle, prow first, in the angle between the wings and the body of the craft. "It amazes me now that it is quite possible to go almost one's entire life without questioning one's beliefs. I would wish to see you so amazed."

Thomas had shipped the oars and the boat bobbed gently, not quite in time with the rhythm of the Cloud Serpent. Ahuitzotl half stood and grasped one of the legs that supported the box in the centre. "I will get off first and sit down, then you can follow."

"Get off onto what, precisely?" The body appeared to be an unbroken cylinder, save for three small fins at one end.

"Let me show you." Ahuizotl turned and started to climb onto—no into—the body of the thing, directly below the metallic box. Apparently one sat inside.

Dawson gently poked the material covering the body. It felt disturbingly springy. "Er, Ahuizotl, what exactly is this thing made of?"

"The engine, here," he nodded to indicate the box above his head, "is a light alloy. The screen at the front is reinforced glass, and the base and frame are wood. The covering, most of what you actually see, is waxed fabric. The trick is getting the right ratio of power to weight." The Aztecan lowered himself into the body of the craft, setting the boat rocking as his weight was removed.

Dawson rather wished he hadn't asked. But there was no going back now. He raised himself from the seat, careful not to tip the balance of the boat. Thomas moved aside to let him step over the rower's bench, and said cheerfully, "I'll see your bag gets sent back up to London, Mr. Dawson, sir, don't you worry."

Dawson muttered his thanks and eased himself into the craft. It was not that difficult: the Cloud Serpent sat so low in the water that its body rode beneath the rowing boat's prow. Once Dawson was inside Thomas started to move the boat away. As Dawson watched his last safe route to land disappear, the boy smiled and shouted back, "Good luck, sirs." Good Grief, was that envy in his eyes?

Ahuizotl crouched in front of him, "Please excuse the rather sparse accommodations. Proper seats were a luxury that had to be left out."

"Actually I'm rather surprised you built it with room for a passenger at all, given what you just said about weight."

"The space was originally intended for spare fuel and luggage. However the fact that it will accommodate two makes it more valuable from a military point of view. The space could be used to house an observer, or a gunner. And I did not build the Cloud Serpent. My son did." Ahuizotl knelt up and started fiddling with the engine. Dawson found himself staring at the man's midriff. "I am afraid I am going to have to presume upon you again, Mr. Dawson. I will prime the engine, but then we need to start the propeller. Given how cramped things are with two of us in here, it might be easier if you reach up and do it."

The propeller? Of course! That was what the wooden thing was. Dawson turned, banging his knee on one of the internal supports, then reached up for the wooden bar across the back of the engine. He wished Alice could see him now: she often got irritated with the restraints and taboos of her upper class world and longed to do something real, something physical. Of course she had, and so had he; and that was why he



was here now, performing contortions in a floating box with this mysterious foreigner. Perhaps his life needed a little more unpredictability, just as Alice had said when they spoke for the last time.

A sweet, pungent odor brought him back to the task in hand.

"Sorry about the smell, Mr. Dawson. Cane alcohol; engine fuel. Azteca technology has rather taken to the internal combustion engine. Now, when I tell you, please pull the propeller round sharply in a clockwise direction. As soon as it catches you must get your hand out of the way and sit down. That's it. Now."

Dawson tugged the propeller. After some initial resistance, it spun free. The engine above him coughed, then died. He caught the wooden paddle again.

"It rarely starts first time. We will have to try again in a moment." Dawson realized that Ahuizotl's apparent impoliteness in making him push the rowing boat out had been a test. If he balked at getting wet feet there was no way he would be able to deal with this undignified and smelly procedure. "Now, if you please, Mr. Dawson."

Dawson pulled again, harder, and this time the cough became a roar. He snatched his hand back from the whirring blade and sat down abruptly. The sweet smell became sharper, and pale smoke vented from the sides of the engine. The noise was deafening.

Ahuizotl was fitting a plank across the space between them for his backrest; he shouted to be heard over the engine, "You might find it best to sit cross-legged, Mr. Dawson." Dawson adjusted his posture accordingly. He hadn't sat like this since he was a child but he found it surprisingly comfortable.

"Once we start moving things will get a bit breezy. You may wish to remove your hat."

Dawson realized he was still wearing his bowler. He took it off and placed it on his lap. He shouted back, "Will it be this loud all the way to London?" He was not sure how he would survive the journey if it was.

"No, it will much quieter once we take off: the engine position means that most of the noise is swept backwards."

"I'm glad to hear it. When we get to London, where will you—we land?"

"On the Thames somewhere near Greenwich: I would have preferred to come down outside the Houses of Parliament, but there are too many bridges that far up. Are you ready, Mr. Dawson?"

No, thought Dawson, but nodded anyway.

Ahuizotl faced forward again and pulled a lever beside him. The engine note changed and the vibration increased. Dawson grabbed the

edge of the craft. He was pressed back against the wooden backrest, gently at first, then more firmly. As the Cloud Serpent gained speed Dawson's tailbone was bruised by the craft's tiny collisions with the water beneath them. Then the vibration stopped, and there was a faint lifting sensation in his gut. The noise fell away, as though they were leaving the world of harsh sounds behind.

He was flying.

They climbed quickly. Below them Dawson glimpsed a tiny figure—Thomas—pulling the boat ashore. The high cliffs were a wall which they paralleled and passed effortlessly. He felt, at a visceral level, the lethal distance between his frail body and the cold hard sea. Strangely, the operation of this primitive instinct did not scare him. It thrilled him, as though he were dreaming, and somehow indestructible.

Then they were over the headland, amongst the birds. The wind tugged at Dawson's hair as they dipped slightly and flew into the next bay. The sea sparkled like a mat of diamonds. Some of the birds from the headland followed them out over the sea, curious to see who was invading their world, but soon gave up the chase.

As they swept over the bay Ahuizotl turned slightly, smiled, and raising his voice to be heard over the drone of the engine, said, "Do you regret your decision, Mr. Dawson? You could be safe on the ground now, heading for the station."

Dawson found himself smiling back at the Aztecan. "No, I don't regret it, sir. Not at all. To fly in a craft built by man, to challenge the birds: who would have thought it possible?"

Ahuizotl laughed, though the wind snatched most of the sound away. "Not your master, apparently."

Dawson looked up. Overhead, the sun was pulling itself towards noon, burning off the last of the clouds. Though Dawson knew it must be a fancy the sun seemed somehow closer. For a moment the fear was back: fly too close to the sun, and your wings will be burnt from you. When he had first heard the legend of Icarus at school he had thought the man must have been a fool. Who would want to risk themselves like that? Better to keep your feet on the ground than attempt to challenge the gods. But a man had built this machine and—dammit—it worked. And even if they did fall, he would not have missed this experience for the world.

To his left the coastline unfurled like a magic lantern show. On the cliffs, a flock of sheep turned and ran from them in perfect unison. What would it be like to fly over people? Would they scatter like sheep?

"I wonder, could we go inland for a while? It would save fuel and time

if we cut across the foot of Cornwall." And I will be the first Englishman to fly over my native soil like a god.

Ahuizotl hesitated for a moment, then nodded and reached forward. "Of course." Dawson felt something shift below him, and the 'Serpent' started to turn in a gentle arc. Dawson began sliding to the right, and braced himself on the sides of the craft, careful not to press the fragile surface too hard. He looked around, trying to locate the piercing hum at the edge of his hearing. The sound was coming from the wires that held the wings in place. His heart-rate quickened for a moment, but he was not really afraid. He realized that he trusted the Aztecan.

As they crossed the coastline the view beneath them jumped into focus, becoming a beguiling patchwork of brown and green and grey. Stone walled fields lapped at islands of rolling heathland and rocky outcrops. Dawson glimpsed movement and craned his neck back. Their shadow raced across the earth, their only link to the world below.

The land dropped away and they flew over a sheltered valley. On the valley floor, a score of whitewashed cottages clustered along a small river. Women sat outside the cottages, spinning yarn and gossiping; their upturned faces were pale smudges. The Cloud Serpent was over the settlement in moments, but on the far side a gaggle of children spilled out of the buildings, racing up the side of the valley to keep pace with the apparition in the sky. The children pointed and whooped, though their shouts were muted by distance. Dawson turned in his seat: just before he lost sight of the children he saw one boy stop and wave. He raised his arm to wave back, but the figure was gone, lost in the dip of the land.

If only Alice could see this! If only she could share this with him, then the experience would be complete. Then he would be complete. He still loved her. Now that he had tasted wonder he could, finally, acknowledge that fact. He still loved her, despite the discrepancies of age and social class. But he would never see her again. "It would have been a boy..." she had written in her final letter.

The wind was making his eyes stream. No, not the wind.

For a while he let tears blur the view. True, he might never get the chance to fly again and should treasure every moment of the journey; but he might never get the chance to cry like this, either.

When his eyes cleared he leaned forward and placed a hand gently on Ahuizotl's shoulder. "Thank you," he said. "You have created something wonderful."

For a moment he thought the Aztecan had not heard him. Then Ahuizotl turned slightly and said, "When Cozmatzin, my only child, was born, and his horoscope was cast, the priests said this: 'He will die young,

to chance, but first he will challenge the skies, and his handiwork will change the fate of nations.' Do you believe in the power of prophecy, Mr. Dawson?"

Up here it was possible to believe anything. "I don't know. Perhaps."

"A far better answer than you would have given on the ground!" They were over high moorland now. Occasional farms and abandoned mine workings dotted the heather-bound landscape. "I do, though there are many things which I once held as truth that I now reject. Prophecies made by Azteca priests do come true more than can be accounted for by mere chance. A month after he finished work on the Cloud Serpent Cozmatzin's name was drawn in the spring lottery. One week later he walked the path to the sun. He was twenty-six. Only children and youths die to usher in the spring. The next year his name would not have gone forward. My wife also went to the sun, willingly, ten years ago, as the Azteca always have in times of famine or crisis. I accepted her death. But Cozmatzin was not willing. He should not have had to die. He was so full of life, of potential. I can no longer serve gods who demand that we accept such losses." Ahuizotl turned back to his controls.

Dawson said nothing, because there was nothing to say. He was ashamed. In his arrogance, he had not thought to ask the most important question: why Ahuizotl had risked his life, abandoned his country and his people, and thrown himself on the mercy of his enemies.

Ahead, sunlight glinted on water. They had almost crossed the foot of Cornwall. A cart was pulled up on one side of a muddy track which ran off towards the coast. As they approached, two men jumped from the cart. One pointed up at the flying machine. Dawson raised his hand to wave, then stopped. The other man was hurriedly pulling a tarpaulin off the back of the cart, exposing something Dawson recognized only too well from his years in the War Office.

"My God. Ahuizotl, they've got—"

"I see it." The craft banked sharply to the right. Dawson had a last glimpse of the man on the back of the cart bringing the gun to bear, then the whole craft shook as bullets tore into the thin fabric. A triad of holes appeared on the wing, just beyond Dawson's hand. The clatter of the gun was strangely distant; surely it was too far away to be causing the damage magically appearing around him.

Something snapped below him and the Cloud Serpent lurched violently. Dawson flailed for a handhold. Splinters pierced his fingertips, but he managed to get a grip on the internal struts.

Ahuizotl had been thrown forward: he pushed himself back into his seat and grabbed for the controls. He was calling out something in a



language Dawson did not recognize. It sounded like a curse, or maybe a prayer. The craft twitched and veered for a few seconds, then came round to fly straight again. Dawson could no longer hear gunfire. He started to settle back into a more comfortable position.

The engine cut out.

The Cloud Serpent stalled as though snagged by a giant hand. The front end dipped sharply and Dawson's fingers tore into fabric as he scrabbled for purchase. He piled into Ahuizotl's backrest. The view ahead, once full of sky, was now terrifyingly full of earth. The only sound was the rush of the wind and the thrumming of the wires.

Ahuizotl started pulling levers. The Cloud Serpent shuddered and jumped, and their descent slowed almost at once. They were no longer heading straight for the ground. But they were still losing height rapidly.

The sea seemed an impossible goal. They would never reach the water before they came down.

Dawson found himself less concerned about the probability of dying than the certainty that the flight would end. Such a short taste of freedom. And they had not even been struck down by the gods; it had been men, with their stupid politics, who had broken their wings. He shimmed back and pressed himself as far as he could into the body of the craft, pulling his legs to his chest and wrapping his arms around them. He closed his eyes. He would prefer not to see the moment of impact.

Yet despite the lack of power, the Cloud Serpent flew remarkably well. Their path began to even out into a shallow glide. Perhaps they could reach the relative safety of the water before they crashed. He might even live through this.

Dawson opened his eyes and raised his head. "Ahuizotl?"

The Aztecan did not reply; presumably he was still intent on the controls before him.

"I'm sorry. This is my fault: if I hadn't asked you to fly inland they wouldn't have seen us."

Ahuizotl shook his head, "No apology needed." His voice sounded strained above the eerie whistling of the wind. "If the Pochteca had not stolen the gun from your government, they would not have shot us with it. Do not curse fate. Wonder at it."

The open land below gave way to sand dunes. Dawson caught his breath: their grass covered tops seemed close enough to touch.

Then they were over water.

The sea rushed up to meet them.

At the last moment Ahuizotl pulled the front of the craft up, and they

belly-flopped into the waves. As it hit there was a loud crack, and the craft slewed violently to the left. Dawson was thrown upwards: his head hit something, but for some reason the pain was in his hand. Then he was flying again, no need of a machine to help him now.

Everything crashed down. He was under water, mouth and nose full of brine. He kicked out and his foot hit something solid. He kicked again. Sand. He realized he was still clasping his legs, and forced himself to uncurl and stand up. The water came up to his chest. His left hand hurt abominably, and he lifted it out of the water to examine it. The back of his hand was a bloody mess. He put it back in the water so he didn't have to look at it.

He looked around. To his left, perhaps thirty yards away, was a beach. Ahead, the Cloud Serpent rode the gentle swell. The pontoon had been torn from the shoreward wingtip and the craft was listing badly, but did not appear to be sinking.

He started to wade towards it, passing a tattered shape of black felt which might once have been a bowler hat. The only sound was the swoosh-sloosh of his own progress. Coming up from behind it was difficult to see inside the craft, and he called out Ahuizotl's name. There was no answer.

Once he was past the wing he could see the Aztecan slumped across the broken screen. He called again and Ahuizotl stirred and pulled himself upright. He shook his head, then, ignoring Dawson, reached forward.

Dawson came up to stand beside the craft. The Cloud Serpent had tipped towards him, and his head was level with the Aztecan's chest. Ahuizotl pulled himself upright, then turned and offered a large map case of waxed leather over the edge of the craft.

"Take this." There were dark stains on the leather.

"You're hurt, sir." Dawson could smell the sickly fuel, and something else fainter, metallic.

"Yes. That does not matter. These matter, now. The plans, for the Cloud Serpent. For the others not yet built: all Cozmatzin's dreams. Please, take it." Ahuizotl closed his eyes as Dawson took the map case.

"Let me get help. A doctor—"

Ahuizotl waved the suggestion away, then put his hand on the edge of the craft to steady himself. "I am not important. What is important is history: 'the fate of nations.'"

"I'm sorry?"

Ahuizotl opened his eyes and looked down at Dawson. His gaze was still intense, but it seemed to be dimming, as though the light were leak-

ing out from behind his eyes. "You have to hear this. The priests know. The Empire will fall. Europe is the new power. Your sun is rising. But first you must suffer ... the worst war in history. Power over the air ... will win that war. Win it quickly. Save more pointless deaths. That power is yours now. Use it well."

"I ... of course. Now let me help you—"

"No. I have played my part." Ahuizotl drew back his hand, leaving a red smear on the vivid green of the bodywork. "All I ask is ... a small favor ... if you please."

"Anything within my power."

"I had matches. They ... got damp. Do you have a light? Perhaps one of those, ah, excellent petroleum lighters that work when wet?"

"Yes, yes I do," Dawson put the map case under his left arm and fumbled in his jacket for his lighter. "Can I ask what you intend to do?"

"Damn myself to the lowest circle of hell ... if the priests are right. The Pochteca must have seen us crash. If they get here and the plans are gone ... they will hunt you down. Cane alcohol burns hot, fast. No traces—"

"Good God, you can't be serious."

"You know I am. Give me the lighter. Then go."

Dawson handed the lighter to the Aztecan, then took a step back. "Sir. It has been an honour."

"For me also," Ahuizotl's voice was a whisper. "May you ever travel with the Earth below you and the Sun above, and never walk in shadow."

Dawson turned and waded ashore. Standing dripping on the sand, he took a last look at the marvellous craft. Ahuizotl stared back across the water at him for a moment, then raised his hands. Dawson was too far away to see the flame until he dropped it. Then, for a moment, the Cloud Serpent shone brighter than the sun. •

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*Anyone who's ever renovated an old house knows that funny things are sometimes discovered to have fallen inside the walls during construction...*

# What I Did On My Summer Vacation

Kate Riedel

ROSIE SET ASIDE THE PAPERBACK INTO WHICH SHE'D JUST pencilled the price, sighed, and looked at the telephone. Surely Steve had *some* time off from his job *once* in a while, and the Pelican Spa and Resort ("Luxury on the Lake") wasn't *that* far away...

"That book, *Octagon Houses*."

Rosie jumped.

The young man who had spoken was of medium height, with chin-length dark hair, sun-browned face, and high cheekbones.

"*Octagon Houses*," he repeated in a voice that somehow belonged to an older man; perhaps it was the trace of an accent. "May I see it?"

He wore dark pants of coarse weave and a vest of the same material over a collarless white shirt, sleeves rolled to the elbows, open at the neck.

"Of course." She went to the window to take the book from the display.

"A lot of books here," the young man said.

"That's my brother's business," she said with a laugh. "This used to be



a dry-goods store.

"That's right. Ormond's." She indicated the glass-topped display case that held her brother's ephemera collection, where the original account book for Ormond's Dry Goods Store held pride of place.

His left eyebrow turned up slightly at the end. He had dark gray eyes. Rosie was glad he wasn't smiling; a smile that matched those eyes would be a dangerous thing.

"Who lives upstairs?" he asked.

"Nobody. It's just storage and work space." She handed him Fowler's treatise on octagon houses.

It slipped through his hands.

"I'm so sorry." They watched it fall, as if in slow motion.

"It's only a Dover facsimile." She picked it up and set it on top of the glass case.

"I worked on a house like this once," he said.

"Have you seen the one in the park across the street?"

He didn't answer. His fingers lifted the pages like a breeze fluttering through them.

"How much is this?"

"The price is inside the front cover."

His fingers fluttered the pages back to the fly-leaf. "Oh, I couldn't afford that."

A couple who had been wandering the aisles approached and asked Rosie to unlock a case at the back so they could look at an old atlas.

When she came back, the young man was gone.

She picked up *Octagon Houses* from where he had left it on the display case and flipped to the front inside cover.

Five dollars.

Was he really that broke? She remembered the way he had looked at the book, had said, "I worked on a house like that, once..."

The man and woman left without buying the atlas.

Rosie went back to pricing paperbacks. The phone remained stubbornly silent.

"ANY MAIL?" ROSIE ASKED HER SISTER-IN-LAW AT SUPPER THAT NIGHT.

"Only bills," said Leanne. Rosie sighed and reached for the new potatoes, then pulled back her hand and took some more salad instead.

"PROBABLY SOME GUY SHE HAS A CRUSH ON, WHO SAID HE'D WRITE THIS SUMMER. They never do." Leanne's voice carried clearly through the open window to where Rosie sat in the rocking chair on the back porch.

"Well, if he hasn't written by now, you'd think she'd be over it."

"Honestly, Den, weren't you ever eighteen? And a rather naive eighteen too."

Rosie quickly folded away the map on which she'd been trying to pinpoint the Pelican Resort.

But the last face in her thoughts as she fell asleep was not that of the perfidious Steve.

"WHO USED TO LIVE UP HERE?" SHE ASKED DEN NEXT MORNING AS THEY HAULED boxes full of his most recent purchases upstairs.

"Nobody, since I've had the building. Why?"

"Oh, I just wondered."

The couple came back and bought not only the atlas, but a 1906 edition of Catherine Parr Traill's *Plant Life in Canada*, and a first edition C.G.D. Roberts. There was a run on paperbacks for beach reading. Rosie hauled out another box of them to price.

"What's that tune you were humming?" Rosie asked Den when he came downstairs at noon to take over the counter.

"Wasn't me. Maybe next door."

Rosie ate her yogurt in the park, then climbed the low hill to the octagon house. The sign on the door said the house was open to the public only on weekends to accommodate restoration. She wandered around the gardens and read the plaque in front of the building. "One of the few Ontario houses constructed according to the principles of phrenologist O.S. Fowler, built in the 1880s as a summer cottage..."

Rosie looked up at the three stories that loomed above her. Some cottage.

A whistled tune, the same one Den had said he wasn't humming, sounded clearly through the noise of construction inside. She followed the sound around the house.

"Oh," she said, stopping just short of bumping into the whistler. "Are you working on *this* octagon house?"

"I am."

"For the summer?"

"Oh no, I'm from here. Jerry Dimon," he said with a slight bow.

"Rosemary Bentley," she said. He really shouldn't bow to girls. With eyes like that, and then to bow...

"It's a very pretty name, Miss Bentley."

"Pretty old-fashioned," she said, making a face. "And you needn't call me Miss. Most people just call me Rosie."

"Rosie," he smiled. The smile was just as heart-stopping as she'd thought it would be. "The same as my sweetheart. Rosie MacKenzie. Only

her name was Rosella." He pronounced the word *sweetheart* as simply and naturally as any other guy might have said *girlfriend*.

Figures he's taken, she thought. "I'd better get back to work," she said hastily. "Uh, drop in sometime."

He smiled again. She took off at a run. When she turned back, he was gone.

ROSIE LISTENED TO THE UPSTAIRS FLOOR CREAK UNDER DEN'S FEET AS HE MOVED back and forth, unpacking and sorting. She could put five dollars in the till and take the Fowler book from the window. She knew his name, where he worked. She might run into him, just accidentally, some day when they both happened to be taking lunch at the same time. And if she just, accidentally, happened to have the book in her bag...

"Ah, excuse me?"

An unprepossessing young man in t-shirt, jeans, and horn-rimmed glasses stood at the counter. He must have grown the moustache to look older, Rosie thought, he couldn't be even twenty.

"May I look at the Fowler book in your window?" he asked.

Rosie got it from the window, reluctantly.

"The Dover abridged edition," he said. "But I don't suppose any earlier edition is likely to turn up soon, and I can't argue with the price. \$5.35 with tax?"

She could hardly say she was saving it for someone else. She punched in the amount and the tax.

"And could I have a written receipt, please? Nice store you have here," he added, looking around.

"It's my brother's."

"Oh," he said, as if he'd like to say more, but couldn't think of anything. He left with book and receipt.

DEN FOUND ROSIE ON THE BACK PORCH AFTER SUPPER.

"You were asking who used to live upstairs? I just remembered, I found this shoved way back on the upstairs closet shelf when we first moved into the store." He held out a flat cardboard box about the size for handkerchiefs.

"Oooh!" as she lifted the lid of the box, then lifted out the wooden embroidery hoop with the unfinished piece of whitework stretched across it. "Ooooh" she said again, tracing the delicate border of white-work flowers, leaves, and eyelets. About two-thirds of the pencilled pattern waited to be embroidered. The slim needle, thread still attached, left two tiny rust spots in the fabric. A twist of embroidery thread and a

pair of small scissors lay in the bottom of the box.

"It was going to be a collar," she said as she spread it carefully on her lap. She turned the hoop over. "She really was an expert needlewoman. You could wear this reversed and no one would know the difference."

"It's yours, if you want it," said Den. "Not really what I collect."

Rosie leaned back, holding up the delicate work to examine it more closely. The porch boards creaked under the rockers, an accompaniment to her humming.

"Why, Rosie, I didn't know you could do that sort of work. That's exquisite," said Leanne over her shoulder.

She had completed a whole flower and stitched down the stem to begin a leaf, as neatly finished on the back as on the front.

"THERE'S SUPPOSED TO HAVE BEEN BE A NUMBER OF 19TH CENTURY TRAVEL BOOKS in that library, and I wondered if I might look them over." Word of Den's weekend purchase had got around.

"He's upstairs. I'll go ask."

She could hear Den singing to himself. But when she opened the door to the back room at the top of the stairs she saw only boxes and shelves of books, dust motes dancing in the sunlight that found its way through the grime of the single window.

"Den?"

He must be in the front room, at the computer.

But only the screen-saver scrolled across the monitor to the faint hum of the computer.

"Den?"

In the back room, the floor creaked, regularly, a counterpoint to a faint thump-thump and a sort of rattly whirl she couldn't quite identify.

Only the dust motes dancing in the pool of sunlight, in time to the tune.

*'Tis pretty to be in Acrha Lea...*

She hadn't realized there were words to it...

Rosie fled down the stairs, to where Den, sandwich in one hand, styrofoam cup of coffee in the other, was saying to the man who wanted the travel books, "I haven't unpacked them yet, but I think I know right where they are. Oh, Rosie, there you are. I can bring the boxes down, if you want, so you can go for lunch."

"No," said Rosie. "No thanks, I'm not that hungry."

"WOULD YOU LIKE TO WORK UPSTAIRS AS A CHANGE FROM THE COUNTER?" DEN asked.

"No thanks. I really don't mind the counter."



She could hear Den shifting boxes upstairs, hear the rattle of the printer churning out messages and orders.

"Oh, I always stay at the Pelican," a health-club-toned woman in well-cut shorts and tailored shirt said to her friend as she paid for a glossy book of Escher prints. "I wouldn't find doing for myself in a cottage exactly relaxing, would you? And they have the spa, of course, and the beach is private."

"Of course the hunky life guards have nothing to do with it," laughed her friend. Rosie caught the scent of expensive sunscreen as they turned from the counter.

She watched them out the door, then, in the ensuing lull, reached for the local phone book, found the number, and dialed. "Pelican Spa and Resort," a female voice answered. "May I help you?"

"May I speak to Steve James?" Rosie stuttered.

"Who?"

"One of your lifeguards."

"Oh. He'd be on duty now. May I take a message?"

She left her name and the phone number of the store.

Steve didn't call. Naive, all right, she thought.

Jerry didn't come in. Well, she no longer had the book to give to him.

She took home a paperback mystery, and took it to bed with her. It turned out that even fictional detectives had relationships. She threw the book at the wall and turned out the light. The hum of the fan was like a song in the darkened room.

*'Tis pretty to be in Ballinderry.*

*'Tis pretty to be in Agha Lea...*

*An older woman thumped and whirled a counterpart to the song at a treadle sewing machine. She was making a wedding dress of gray silk—half-price from Ormond's, only eight cents a yard. The carved mother-of-pearl buttons had been a present from Mr. Ormond.*

*'Tis pretty to be in little Ram's Island.*

*Sitting under the ivy tree.*

*Och hone...*

*Rosie dropped the collar on which she stitched—it was for the gray silk dress—onto her plaid-skirted lap, and reached for her scissors from where they lay beside a little book.*

She woke to the relieved realization that it was Sunday, and the book store was closed today.

LEANNE HAD PLANNED AN AFTERNOON AT THE BEACH, BUT BY NOON THE WEATHER had turned stormy, and so they found themselves lining up for the

Sunday afternoon tour of the McNab Octagon House. Rosie looked around for Jerry. No sign of him. Well, he wouldn't hang around his work place on his day off.

"This house was built as the summer home of the Andrew McNab family," the guide said as they followed her into the entry hall. "McNab was one of the new Toronto business elite, and he built this house as a place to hold elaborate house parties in order to introduce his grown children into society."

Through a half-open door to a work space, Rosie glimpsed a young man bent over a computer. He looked familiar, but the guide reached out and closed the door before she could be sure.

"Anyone who's ever renovated an old house," the guide went on, "knows that funny things are sometimes discovered to have fallen inside the walls during construction, and the McNab Octagon House is no exception."

"Brown bag lunches from 1881?" a tourist joked.

"Not quite," the guide said, "But as you can see by this whiskey bottle, someone evidently brought along his own refreshment and found it convenient to hide the evidence in the wall.

"Now this," after a pause for scattered chuckles, "we found just this week. All we know about these people so far is that they aren't McNabs. A family like the McNabs would have had painted portraits done; you'll see some of those when we reach the downstairs parlor. Ferrotypes, or tintypes, as they're usually called, were a working-class phenomenon."

"Looks a little like Rosie, don't you think, Den?" said Leanne. "What do you think, Rosie... Rosie, are you okay?"

"I guess I'm, um, not feeling too well. You go on, I'll wait on the verandah."

"I've told her she needs to eat more than salad and yogurt," she heard Leanne say. "She's really not overweight."

Rosie collapsed onto a bench on the verandah.

It hadn't been a book in her dream. It had been a tintype case, black fabric molded to imitate leather, and inside, two frames stamped out in imitation gold filigree. On one side smiled a girl of perhaps nineteen, her dark hair pulled back, her rounded figure covered by a long-sleeved plaid dress, plain, except for the white-work collar. Not as elaborate as the unfinished collar at home, but despite the poor quality of the tintype the embroidery stood out as exquisitely worked.

The portrait in the opposite frame was of a young man whose left eyebrow lifted slightly at the corner. High cheekbones.

*Oh, would that I were in little Ram's Island.*

*Oh, would that I were with Jeremy Diamond.*

*He would whistle. and I would sing...*

Her arms encircled empty space; the embrace was only a dark shudder, desire indistinguishable from terror.

She opened her eyes to look into his.

"Rosella," he breathed.

"Rosemary," she managed to gasp, even to inject some indignation into it.

"Rosemary," he said.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Well, he was rich, of course," Jerry said after a moment. "And handsome. And she was only the maid. It happened just a year after she went to work for them. She threw herself down the central stairwell."

She wanted so much to take away that cold sorrow, see that smile once more...

"You okay, Rosie?" Den asked from the door.

"Yeah," Rosie replied, from the bench where she sat alone.

ON HER LUNCH HOUR, ON FRIDAY, SHE WALKED OVER TO THE OFFICES OF THE *Examiner*.

"I'm sorry," the receptionist said. "Nothing before 1937. The offices burned down that year. There was a young man asking the same thing last week. What were you looking for?"

"Oh, um... I'm not sure."

"Hey, Rosie," Den greeted her on her return to the store. "Someone named Steve wants you to go to a party with him tomorrow."

Great, Rosie thought. My brother has to take the call, *and* it's for the Saturday I work.

"I accepted for you. He said he'd pick you up at five. I'll come by and close the store."

SATURDAY AFTERNOON WAS SLOW FOR A CHANGE. ROSIE, PACING THE AISLE AND wondering if she'd even recognize Steve, found herself at the ephemera display case.

*Grey silk... mother-of-pearl buttons. a present from Mr. Ormond...* she ran to the counter for the keys.

The leather spine of the Ormond's account book was a bit crumbly, but the inside pages were solid, the black ink clear. Once she was used to the spidery ascenders and descenders the old-fashioned script read easily enough. *Buttons of bone, shell, glass; bolts of fabric, muslin 10¢ a yard, silk (fancy-figured) 25¢.* She supposed book prices would have been com-

parable, so five dollars for a second-hand paperback would look like a lot of money...

"Rent rc'd Mrs. M. MacKenzie, seamstress, for rooms above store: \$5.00."

*MacKenzie.* But this was M. MacKenzie. Mrs. M. MacKenzie. The rent entries appeared regularly through the 1879 income column.

She almost missed the entry in the expenses column.

"Wages, Sales Assistant, Miss R. MacKenzie: \$3.00."

"Hey, Rosie, your date is here," Den called from the door.

STEVE WAS AS GOOD-LOOKING AS SHE REMEMBERED. THAT LIFE GUARD'S TAN, THOSE cool sunglasses—she hoped Den had been suitably impressed.

"You remember to bring your bathing suit?"

Den hadn't mentioned it was going to be a swimming party. "Rosie's been working in her brother's book store this summer," Steve added by way of introduction to the couple in the back seat.

"That must be a drag," drawled the girl.

"Uh, not really," said Rosie.

"Rosie's a real bookworm," said Steve.

"Oh. Hey, aren't you going to pick up Courtney?"

"Her date's bringing her."

"Sor-ry," the girl said, "I forgot. Steve's on the outs with his sweetie," she explained to the guy sitting beside her. Steve gave her a dirty look over his shoulder, then grinned apologetically at Rosie.

Oh well, I'm the one that's here, Rosie thought. Or am I being naive again?

I WAS BEING NAIVE, SHE THOUGHT AS SHE WATCHED THE LAST PINK CLOUDS OF THE sunset darken.

Even if she'd brought her bathing suit, she wouldn't have cared to wear the one-piece suitable to her figure among the bronzed bikinied beach babes here. And after—how many beers? (she'd lost count)—Steve could only talk about how some rich woman with a BMW had been after his ass all summer.

He finally wandered off, presumably to relieve himself. At least *I'm* relieved, she thought. And the music's a nice change from what Leanne and Den always play...

She closed her eyes to better enjoy the rhythm.

Mistake.

Ugh!

This wasn't the way she'd imagined her first kiss from Steve. Stale beer,



slobber and tongue?

And totally lacking in privacy.

"Really, Steve," a female voice said above them as Rosie struggled out from under, "if you're reduced to this!"

Rosie, tripping over her skirts as she stood, saw that the speaker was yet another tanned and perfect body in shorts and halter, sunglasses in hand. The young man with her looked vaguely familiar; hardly in the same league with the girl. That ridiculous moustache...

She concentrated on brushing sand from her skirts, hoping fervently they'd go away.

Apparently they did, because she heard Steve yelling, "Courtney!"

She looked up to see Courtney wave cheerily, turn her back and walk away with her companion into the parking lot.

No point demanding Steve take her home; in his state that wouldn't be useless, it would be suicidal.

"Hey, Rosie, I'm sorry—"

Be careful what you wish for, you may get it.

She ducked away from Steve.

"Bitch!" he yelled after her.

She marched away without looking back, away from the beach, up the path to where the two-lane highway was a pale ribbon between massed shadows of pines under the full moon. There'd been a gas station about half a mile down the road, she could swallow her pride and call Den from there. Bad enough to be naive, no point being naive with sore feet.

Headlights flared behind her, and a car screeched past and to a halt just ahead of her.

And now, she thought, calculating the depth of the ditch next to the road, wondering if there was space to run between the trees, now I have to deal with some roadside rapist.

"Hey!" yelled a voice from the car, the same voice that had spoken above her and Steve. "Hey, can we give you a ride?"

"I hope you didn't take what I said personally," the young woman said over the seat as Rosie climbed in the back. "I meant him, not you. Sheesh! I can't believe I ever went out with that jerk. Well, he was good-looking. Live and learn, right? I'm Courtney, this is my cousin Rick," patting the driver companionably on the shoulder. "He thinks he's seen you before."

"My brother's bookstore," said Rosie. "You bought the octagon house book."

"He's working at the McNab Octagon House this summer," Courtney explained.

"So how do you like it?" Rosie asked.

"Cool—especially the ghost," Rick said.

"Really?" said Courtney. "It's haunted?"

"Really. A guy who had to work late swears he heard whistling just before something crashed down the scaffolding. But there were no marks on the scaffolding next day, and no one else heard anything. I've been trying to track down a candidate for ghost-ship, but nothing so far."

"Maybe it was..." Rosie cleared her throat. "Maybe it was a servant girl betrayed by one of the sons, throwing herself down the stairwell."

"Oh, romantic. I like that," said Courtney. "Do you believe that?"

"I'm not sure. There'd be a record, wouldn't there?"

"Not necessarily," said Rick. "It's not something a family like the McNabs would want publicized."

"What would you do if you *did* meet a ghost, Rick?" Courtney asked.

"What Grandma told us to do. Ask it what it wants."

"I don't remember Grandma telling us that. I think you read it in a book," Courtney said. "*I'd* run like hell. Wouldn't you?" she laughed over the back of the seat to Rosie.

ROSIE WATCHED THE CAR OUT OF SIGHT, THEN UNLOCKED THE DOOR OF THE BOOK store, deactivated the alarm, and relocked the door behind her.

The streetlights turned the front of the store yellow; the nightlight was a white glow against the back wall, next to the door. And, from upstairs, singing.

*Oh would that I were in little Ram's Island. Oh would that I were with Jeremy Diamond...*

"I can do this tomorrow," she said aloud.

*What would you do if you did meet a ghost...*

"Oh no I can't." She dropped her key into her pocket, marched down the book-lined aisle and flung open the door to the stairs.

*He would whistle, and I would sing,*

*And we would make the whole island ring.*

Through the door at the top of the stairs she could see a golden glow that flickered slightly, hear the creak of the rocking chair, the song ending in a lament.

*Och hone, och hone...*

The boxes Den had stacked in the corner glimmered faintly through an old woman who rocked and sewed in the light of a candle on the window sill.

Whoever Rosie had been expecting, it wasn't the other Rosie's *mother*.

She cleared her throat. "Mrs. MacKenzie?" she quavered.

The old lady smiled. "Mrs. Rentz, dear," she said.

"Oh," said Rosie. "Well." She cleared her throat again. "Um. What do you want, Mrs. Rentz?"

ROSIE SEATED HERSELF GINGERLY ON THE MIST-DAMP PARK BENCH.

She knew, before she looked, when Jerry sat down beside her, body insubstantial as moonlight, eyes like stars.

"You've been talking to Rosie," he said sullenly.

"Yes. But I'd already almost figured it out. If she was the one who threw herself down the stairwell, why are *you* the Octagon House ghost?"

"Because I loved her."

Rosie waited.

"Very well then, I was the one to throw myself down the stairwell. I couldn't bear to live when she broke the engagement."

"Even being a ghost doesn't stop you from lying, does it?" she said.

"What makes you think *she* told the truth?" he said with palpable resentment.

"What *really* happened?" she asked.

"That night." When he finally spoke, it was reluctantly, like a child who has been caught out in a story. "I went back to the octagon house that night. The night she gave me back the pictures. The rest of the workmen had all gone home. There wasn't even a night watchman. The staircase wasn't finished. I climbed the scaffolding. It was still open at the top. You could see for miles and miles."

His voice opened, as he spoke, like the view from the cupola he remembered. "I felt like God, all the way up there. I had a drink. And then another one. And then the bottle was empty, and it was cold, and I decided I'd better climb down the scaffolding." He paused, dramatically. "Only I slipped."

"You sound like you're proud of it."

"Well, it was *still* her fault."

"Why?" asked Rosie.

"She shouldn't have said..." His mouth returned to its sullen lines. "Why ask me when you've been talking to her?"

She remembered Mrs. Rentz's clear, quiet voice. "And of course, my dear, I knew I could not have a drunkard as father to my children..."

"Jerry," she said softly. "What do you really want?"

"To know what happened to Rosie," he said. His voice might have been only a breeze sighing through the park.

"You don't know?" she asked, startled into normal speech.

"A ghost is tied to one place."

"Oh." Rosie said. "But Rosie, your Rosie..."

"Well, she died differently from me, didn't she? Better."

But her ghost is here, Rosie thought. But she said, "She married Gottlieb Rentz. They moved to Alberta, and they had six children and 23 grandchildren before she died."

And now, she thought, he'll leave.

She kept silence, waiting for him to go.

But he was still there.

Waiting.

Perhaps there were things that even ghosts can't ask.

Or say.

A jerk is a jerk, Rosie thought. Even a dead one. But maybe, sometimes, even a jerk...

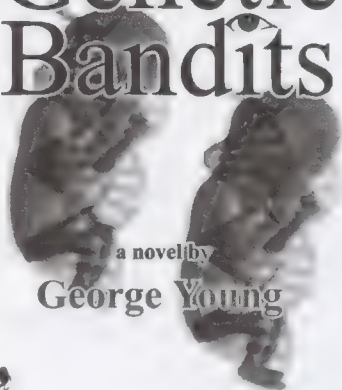
"She wore the gray silk when she married Gottlieb," she said. "But she used a store-bought collar on it."

The chill went off the night.

She was alone. •

*Who wants to murder four transgenic babies?  
Who will save them?*

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*mirror:mirror*

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*There was barely anything left at all of Jorge's Bambi—just one big round circle with a head and a single set of antlers—even the nose was clipped.*

# The Second Most Important Picture

James Stephen Forrest

THE CLOCK FELL FROM THE WALL AT THE BACK OF THE ROOM with a clatter that made everyone jump—even Mrs. Arden.

It banged off the top of the book shelf, catapulting splintered plastic into the air. Some of the shards fell onto desks; others settled in quietly amongst the children's feet. One particularly errant missile, catching the corner of a nearby table, hit Sophie in the cheek. Startled, the girl broke into loud sobs that blanketed the entire classroom and brought tears that dropped like rain.

The clock refused to stop, rolling to the front of the room until it ran into the wall beneath the blackboard where it turned three circles before finally falling backwards onto the floor, silent and still at last.

Kirsten watched as one student, not three feet away from the teacher, actually got up and stood on his chair. Another boy, Chayce, felt confident enough to leave his desk and blaze his own trail. Racing to the front of the room, he shouted, "Gotcha!" and swept the clock up in his arms, hoisting it above his head. One little girl, who usually didn't have an opinion about anything, clapped her hands together, and proclaimed,



"Now *that* was really exciting!"

Jorge laughed out loud.

Nobody's hand was raised. Everybody was talking—except Kirsten, of course, who now only looked at Jorge and smiled—watching, as she always did, but saying nothing.

When Mrs. Arden finally stood and walked to the front of the room, Kirsten listened as the teacher's quiet voice rose just above the chatter of the classroom.

"Jorge," she said. "Enough silliness for one day. Sit down."

The class fell silent.

Those students who had been foolish or brave enough to leave their desks now hurried back to their seats—bumping elbows and shoulders as they scurried down the aisles.

Mrs. Arden's footsteps tapped out a hard steady beat as she walked across the floor to Sophie. "Sophie," she said, kneeling beside the child's desk. "Time to move on."

The accident on Sophie's cheek was rubbed away with a wave and a flourish of the teacher's hand. "You haven't been hurt," she said. "There's barely a mark. Stop crying."

Sophie caught a final sob as it tried to escape and sucked it back in.

Mrs. Arden stood and surveyed the class—her ice-water eyes looking down upon the rows of solemn faces spread out before her. "Chayce," she said, "Give me the clock, and bring me the pieces."

Everyone knew from the sound of Mrs. Arden's voice that this job had not been given to just anyone. Every single piece of plastic, absolutely every single broken part, would be found and given to Mrs. Arden.

Chayce was Mrs. Arden's most dependable student. All the children knew it. She'd told them so.

The voice continued. "Keep writing," it said. "The day is early. We have much to learn."

Jorge looked over at Kirsten, sent her a quick little wave from across the room, and picked up his book.

"Mr. Willis can bring us a new clock later."

Mrs. Arden sat down again at the table where she had been listening to Jorge read.

Everyone else except Kirsten settled back into journal writing.

Kirsten knew that she shouldn't have been drawing pictures, especially ones of her teacher, but she was. Usually, she didn't do things that got her into trouble, but this time things were different. This was one of Kirsten's more important pictures. This picture, Kirsten had decided, was the second most important picture she'd ever drawn in her life, and

it just had to be finished. Hunched over her page, her long blonde hair swept the top of her desk, hiding her work.

Kirsten tilted her head and peeked at her teacher, who continued to listen to Jorge read. Kirsten knew that if Mrs. Arden saw her looking, she'd be caught for sure. Her teacher was smart that way. One minute she could be listening to kids practicing their reading envelopes and in the next—there she'd be—right beside you, tapping her foot and asking what on earth it was you thought you were doing.

Kirsten stole her eyes away from Mrs. Arden, and worked faster.

"Journal writing is for learning to put the thoughts in your head into word pictures on paper—not for drawing pictures and coloring," Mrs. Arden had told Kirsten.

Mrs. Arden's students were not allowed to disobey.

When Mrs. Arden spoke, she expected her students to listen.

Absolutely.

Totally.

Forever and ever—which is why Kirsten had gotten into trouble in the first place.

Mrs. Arden was the Deer Hunter. The children sang songs about her on the playground, and some of them—those who had never been taught by her—even played Deer Hunter games.

She was also the grade two teacher at Edgewater Elementary, a private school where children were given rules and made to follow them.

"At Edgewater," Kirsten's parents once explained, "even Jorge's parents know how important it is to have consequences for children who disrupt the learning of others and forget to come to school ready to learn. Jorge is lucky to have Mrs. Arden for a teacher."

Though the students never wished for Mrs. Arden to be their teacher, everybody wished they could draw like Kirsten.

Kirsten's eyes swallowed things whole. She noticed everything, and never forgot. Her pictures were different every time you looked at them. If she drew a lion you could hear its friends roaring in the distance in some far away corner of the page she hadn't quite finished. If she drew a picture of mountains and a lake, the first time you saw the picture you'd notice how the water in the lake moved with the color of an orange-red sun—but shut your eyes, and touch the picture, and a cold wind that put goose bumps on your arms blew down from the tops of those same rocky cliffs.

Mrs. Arden was standing in Kirsten's portrait where she often found herself standing during the day, at the back of the room, watching her students work. Kirsten had already finished parts of her picture. The

book rack on the shelf that rested against the wall behind Mrs. Arden was finished. The styrofoam cups of long spindly sweet peas draping the edge of the shelf on the other side of Mrs. Arden were also colored, and the Chinese fighting kites made by the class a few weeks earlier hung from the ceiling and swayed in the air above the plants.

It was at the top of Kirsten's page, just to the side of Mrs. Arden's head, that a hole had been cut out of the picture where the clock had been.

Now Kirsten poked a hole in her paper and cut out the sweet peas. One at a time, each of the long-tailed sweet peas at the back of the room dropped over the counter and fell to the floor.

"Jorge, bring me another book," said Mrs. Arden, placing the note she'd been writing to his parents in an envelope. Jorge had left his reading bag at home. "Remember to bring it back tomorrow along with your other book."

Kirsten sat up straight and pretended to be writing. Jorge sauntered over to the book rack, replaced the one he'd borrowed to read to Mrs. Arden, and started winding the carousel around. Jorge didn't like writing in his journal, either. He talked too much, and his printing was messy.

"Today, Jorge," said the teacher. "You may think they do, but books are not in the habit of changing covers from one squeaky turn to the next."

Kirsten looked casually away to another corner of the room to where Mrs. Arden had tacked up the students' Bambi pictures.

There was barely anything left at all of Jorge's Bambi—just one big round circle with a head and a single set of antlers—even the nose was clipped.

They were the reason everybody listened in Mrs. Arden's class. Jorge hadn't listened, and his Bambi had all but disappeared.

Mrs. Arden cut Jorge's Bambi the day after they were finished. He'd called Chayce a bad name. On that day, Mrs. Arden scissored both of Jorge's Bambi's back legs, and dropped them into the garbage.

"He doesn't think enough of his Bambi to behave himself," she announced to the class. "Maybe tomorrow Jorge will start thinking about somebody besides himself."

Nobody wanted their Bambi cut up like Jorge's, but it still happened.

Sophie lost all four hooves the day she tattled on another student for giving away an apple.

Teesha screamed the day Mrs. Arden pulled her Bambi down off the wall and cut out his spots.

Once, after Mrs. Arden snipped off the right hoof of his Bambi's front leg, Jorge asked her if his Bambi would go to heaven when he was all gone.

Kirsten remembered how Mrs. Arden looked at him and cut off the

other hoof. "I truly hope, Jorge," she said, "that you do not plan on your Bambi being the first to find out."

Kirsten took a deep breath and worked faster.

"Sometimes, we're just a whole lot better off keeping quiet when something happens that we don't like."

Kirsten's crayons skipped over the paper, setting the page ablaze.

The class Bambies hung in tatters and shreds on the wall. At the beginning of the year, the bulletin board where Mrs. Arden had placed the Bambies was covered by the class herd. Now dirty brown holes gaped out like eyes from behind mangled and broken scrap paper body parts.

"You're not being fair," Mrs. Arden would say as she slipped her scissors into the paper and snipped off piece of a leg or tail. "You and your Bambi are in this together. Look after yourselves. Look after your Bambies."

Kirsten's fingers grew tight and stiff.

The first day of school Mrs. Arden had given everyone an extra big piece of paper. "I want to see a lot of detail," she said. "The more the better. If you want, you can even put bows in your Bambi's antlers and tail."

"Put your Bambi in a forest," she said. "Then he'll have a place to live and play in."

And all the children drew forests and ponds and rocks and trees for their Bambies. Mrs. Arden insisted the students draw in spots, and hooves, and antlers.

"And don't go over the lines," she warned. "And keep coloring in the same direction."

Some of the children weren't even allowed to go out for recess because they hadn't finished drawing, but they didn't care—they'd all but forgotten about the deer hunter. When Mrs. Arden finally tacked each of the Bambies up on the wall, everyone in the class beamed.

"How good your Bambies look!" Mrs. Arden exclaimed, smiling her nicest smile of the year. "Even our rainbow Bambies are special. They're all wonderful! Each and every one of them!"

Kirsten's Bambi could fly. She'd given him butterfly wings.

His name was Leopod. An elf sat on his back. The elf was Sherman, Leopod's best friend. Leopod had preferred shiny black dancing shoes over hooves, and had a tail that twirled in the air just above him so he never lost his balance.

But most important of all, Leopod loved to dance in the air above the ground. He danced on the tops of trees and rooftops. He danced over lakes and ponds. He danced in the air with the bear that lived in a cave



down Mulberry Lane. And sometimes he even danced with Kirsten. He would have danced with Jorge too, if Jorge had let him.

Leopod loved dancing almost as much as Kirsten loved drawing. That was why it had all been so terrible.

Kirsten had tried hard to make sure Mrs. Arden would never hurt him, but in the end Kirsten hadn't been able to save Leopod from Mrs. Arden's scissors, any more than any of the other students had been able to save their Bambies.

Leopod's dancing days were over.

They ended yesterday during journal writing when Mrs. Arden clipped Leopod's wings and crunched them into her fist.

"You've been acting very odd lately, Kirsten," Mrs. Arden said, tossing the little paper ball that was Leopod's wings onto her desk. "Kirsten," she said, "there's a time and a place for everything. And now is not the time to be drawing."

Kirsten, her eyes soft and wide, gazed back at Mrs. Arden, and nodded.

Now, Kirsten carefully examined her picture of Mrs. Arden. Brown curls framed the face in waves that flowed softly around her shoulders and neck.

Mrs. Arden had a very long neck—even when her collar was buttoned, she had a very long neck. Her neck was so long that her head stood on top of her neck like an apple on the end of a stick.

Kirsten reached into the paper with her scissors, and cut off the tails of four Chinese kites. The four Chinese kite tails at the back of the room drifted to the floor. Two students, catching the movement out of the corner of their eyes saw the kite tails as they spiralled downward. The boy, a big question mark on his face, turned his hands up in front of him, shrugged his shoulders at one of the girls, and went back to work. The girl waited a little longer to see if the tails did anything else, but then she too picked up her pencil and started to write again. Kirsten moved her own paper kite tails to the corner of her desk, and dropped them on top of the clock and sweet peas.

"Chayce," Mrs. Arden called across the room. "Come and let me listen to you read."

Chayce's Bambi was the only Bambi in the class that had not been cut. It was as good as the day Mrs. Arden tacked it to the wall. Kirsten wondered if Chayce ever did anything bad. Maybe I should draw Chayce into the picture too, she thought, but then decided against it. He didn't hurt things the way she did. He wasn't anything like Mrs. Arden.

Only Mrs. Arden hurt things that didn't hurt her.



Kirsten turned her picture sideways and then back again. The teacher's left hand hung down at the side, the fingers splayed wide apart. In Mrs. Arden's other hand she held her special scissors—sharp, pointed, and black—poised and ready in the air above her head, her right thumb and finger jutting out through the holes in the handle.

"If I'm good for the rest of the week," Jorge asked Mrs. Arden one day when she cut off his Bambi's antler, "can I draw another antler and glue it back on?"

"No, Jorge, you can't." Mrs. Arden said. "But you can behave yourself so your Bambi will be able to keep his other antler."

Kirsten continued to draw, adding a finishing touch or two, and a bit more color to a page that already seemed to have as much color as it could possibly hold.

Mrs. Arden stood up from her chair at the table. "Excellent, Chayce," she said. "You are a terrific reader. You really are!"

Journal time was almost over. Chayce walked back to his seat, and Mrs. Arden went to the side board and started to write out the announcements for the day. Mrs. Arden must have felt something, because she brushed a lock of hair from her shoulders, and then glanced down at the floor before returning to her writing on the board. The lock that had fallen to the floor went unnoticed, however.

Kicking her feet under the seat, Kirsten pushed the dark brown paper into the corner with the rest of her picture parts, and picked up a green crayon to help highlight Mrs. Arden's dress. The toes of Kirsten's running shoes balanced themselves precariously against the floor, wavering back and forth as she worked.

Mrs. Arden had a skinny waist—a grasshopper's waist. It hardly covered any paper at all.

Mrs. Arden finished writing her announcements and moved to the back of the room. Kirsten pulled out a yellow crayon from her set and colored Mrs. Arden's belt. Kirsten measured the size of Mrs. Arden's waist again with her crayon, turning the paper this way and that, admiring her teacher's picture from different angles.

And for a moment she was happy.

But only a moment.

"Kirsten! Is this what you're supposed to be doing during journal time?" she heard her teacher's voice suddenly ask. "Is this all you've learned from yesterday?" Mrs. Arden stepped into place beside Kirsten's desk. Quietly, feebly, Kirsten slipped her hands over the picture.

"Answer me, Kirsten," said Mrs. Arden, pushing Kirsten's hands away, and looking hard at what her student had drawn. "Is this what you're sup-

posed to be doing?" The rhythmic, hollow tapping of the teacher's foot rose up from the floor and into the room.

Kirsten shook her head, and gazed down at her desk. The entire class had stopped working. Slowly, Kirsten pushed the picture toward her teacher.

"Oh, no you don't," said Mrs. Arden, turning to walk back to the front of the room. "You just keep that picture right there on your desk so you can think about what you've been doing."

Kirsten saw Mrs. Arden stop on her way up the aisle to glance back at the sweet peas—first on the cupboard; then to the floor where she also noticed the Chinese kite tails. "And while you're doing that," she added, shaking her head, "I'll think about what I'm going to do."

Mrs. Arden moved quickly to her desk where she scooped up her sharp black scissors and addressed the class. "This is going to be a very busy morning!" she said. "A very, very busy morning!"

Each student's eyes flitted to someone else's eyes somewhere in the room. Jorge turned around in a kind of silent slow motion act of support and stared at his friend, mouthing his words so no one else might hear. Kirsten didn't understand either, and in the next instant, Jorge's face disappeared, leaving Kirsten to face her teacher alone.

Chayce sat in his desk expectantly, as he had a countless number of times before—safe in the knowledge that nothing like this could ever happen to him.

Kirsten glanced around the room and quietly exchanged her crayons for scissors.

"You know what happens next, don't you, Kirsten?" asked her teacher, in a voice that told everyone in the room she'd been through all of this a hundred times before and just couldn't believe she was going to have to go through it all again.

Mrs. Arden glided, dream-like, toward the Bambies across the room. "Such nonsense," she muttered. "You've changed, Kirsten, and not for the better. You've become far too defiant for your own good."

Mrs. Arden plucked Kirsten's Leopard off the wall and stood for a moment, staring sternly at the deer that Kirsten had drawn.

"We both know what we have to do now, don't we, Kirsten?" she asked.

Kirsten looked down at her own picture, and then back again at Mrs. Arden.

"Oh, no, you don't," said the teacher. "It's too late now to change anything. You should have thought of your Bambi before you started drawing. That's what happens, Kirsten; people have to live with the decisions they make."

Kirsten, her eyes shining wide and deep, feet flat on the floor, lifted

her desk with her knees and pushed it back with a screech across the linoleum.

"You should have learned from what happened yesterday, Kirsten," said the teacher as she lifted Leopod high in the air for everyone to see.

The scissor blades opened up, its razor teeth ready to slice and tear.

Kirsten slipped her thumb and finger through the holes of her own pair of scissors, and lifted her art work up off her desk.

"Do you see what you've done, Kirsten?" Mrs. Arden said. "Do you know what you have to do?"

Kirsten nodded.

"Too bad you didn't figure..."

Mrs. Arden stopped. She looked at Leopod critically for another moment, turning the paper in her hand, as if deciding something. Then she frowned, the lines in her forehead curling into her eyebrows.

Suddenly, Mrs. Arden wasn't looking at the picture anymore, she was watching it.

Kirsten sat, motionless and waiting.

Mrs. Arden turned away from Leopod to glare back at Kirsten. The blades of her scissors gleamed in the morning light.

"I'd almost say—" the teacher began, then, after a pause, more to herself than to Kirsten. "I'd almost say your little deer is trying to tell me something."

Mrs. Arden turned away from the picture to Kirsten, who had refused to look away, the blades of her own blunt end scissors slicing their own path of light over the drawing she held in her hand.

The teacher's jaw clenched tight. "This is for your own good, Kirsten," she said. "You know the rules."

Kirsten stared back, her face blank and expressionless.

Sophie started to cry.

Mrs. Arden's face became red. She looked hot.

The rest of the children held their breath and listened, wrapped in a world that seemed to be unfolding around them.

Kirsten's teeth dug into her bottom lip, blanching the skin white.

Mrs. Arden lifted her arm and leaned forward.

Kirsten dug her scissors into her picture.

The raspy, sickly sound of scissors echoed in the ears of the children and caught them, forcing the seconds that spread out before them deep into their lives.

She didn't scream.

She didn't do anything.

She was just like paper. •

*Peace. Cengri loved peace best of all things in her world. Not being scolded, not being pinched, not falling asleep over her work and being slapped awake. Peace...*

# Hedd

Susan Mayse

MANY YEARS AGO, IN A TENDER VALLEY, FOUR STONE HOUSES stood among green fields below a gray mountain. In the next valley stood another four houses, and on a clear day people could see the cooking smoke from four houses still farther away, at the edge of the world.

Once a hermit came here to live. Wild animals helped her build a sanctuary, singing as they worked. The stag carried branches for her walls; the eagle brought grass to thatch her roof; the salmon gathered hazelnuts that fell into his pool for her evening meal. When at last the hermit slept under green grass, the animals fell silent.

Years later a girl called Cengri was born in the house nearest the churchyard that had been the hermit's sanctuary. Even after her parents slept forever, she liked going to the small stone church, where she could kneel with her bare feet tucked warmly under her skirt while the old priest sang his strange words. Sometimes after the blessing he gave the children currant cakes.

Walking to church one cold gray day, Cengri tripped and fell.

"Filthy child, playing in the mud!" cried the woman who had arrived one day saying she was Cengri's aunt. "Wait for us outside."

Cengri trudged into the round churchyard as the others went into the

warmth. She found her two broken white stones deep in the grass on her mother's grave and sat down to play. One stone was carved with a flowering vine, the other with a sleeping cat; they were Cengri's secret.

Soon rain swept down in a silver wall from the mountain. Cengri ran for the church door, but it was barred. As she huddled against the south wall, the rain misted on her hair and the cold seeped into her bones. She stood on one foot until it grew numb, then on the other foot, thinking about currant cakes. One tear began to trickle, but she wiped her face quickly so Aunt wouldn't see.

Cengri's face was dry again when one drop of water fell on it, as warm as a summer breeze. She heard a sound overhead and stepped out into the cold rain to look up. Where the stone wall was thickly supported, right at the top, she saw a small gray stone face.

The face had a sharp chin and pointed ears. It was not quite a human face, not quite a cat's face, not quite like anything. Cengri remembered travelers resting by her father's hearth, long ago when she was little, who told of fierce stone creatures protecting the great city churches. But this was only a small creature.

"Shall I be your friend?" Cengri asked.

The rain on her lashes made her think for one instant that the creature blinked its eyes, gray in gray like living stone.

Then the church door creaked open and Cengri heard the old priest blessing the children. "Peace be with you."

Peace. Cengri loved peace best of all things in her world. Not being scolded, not being pinched, not falling asleep over her work and being slapped awake. Peace.

"*Hedd* can be your name, creature: *Peace*. And peace be with you."

Aunt marched around the corner. "Wicked child, making us wait."

Cengri smiled all the way home, even though Aunt's girl stuffed her cheeks with currant cake while her own stomach rattled like an empty churn.

ONE COOL SUNNY MORNING, AUNT SENT CENGRI TO THE PRIEST WITH A BASKET of fresh eggs. He was too blind to see her bruises but he smiled at the fragrant wayside flowers Cengri had picked for him. She ate his stale currant cake in two bites and ran across the churchyard.

"Hedd?" Cengri looked up at the gray stones.

A pointed gray face peered wisely down at her. She could see more of the stone creature today, crouched in a hole halfway between the green valley and the pale sky. It was the size of a half-grown cat. Cengri saw that it had fearsome claws; they looked strong enough to break stone.



Cengri swung her empty basket as she told Hedd about the currant cake and about Aunt. She told him of the fierce stone creatures that guarded the great city churches. One drop of warm water fell onto her forehead, though the sky above her head was clear blue.

She stood on her toes and stretched up her arms, but the stone creature perched far beyond her reach. "Hedd, are you lonely? Come home with me. I won't let anyone hurt you."

Cengri went to play with her secret stones, forgetting that she had firewood to chop. Aunt's daughter found her there and threw the carved white stones far across the churchyard. Together they splashed into the spring's deep pool, lost forever. She dragged Cengri home by the arm.

After dark, when her work was done, Cengri crept into the room behind the dairy. Long ago when she was little, she had a pretty room over the garden. Her mother would sing as she braided ribbons into Cengri's hair and sing as she folded her into her sweet-smelling bed. Now the garden was a tangle of weeds and Cengri slept on straw in a room that had once held turnips and onions.

In the morning Cengri had a sore throat, but Aunt pushed her out the door to hang laundry. "Lazy child. We should sell you at the market." She had sold almost everything else—the embroidered linens, the silver spoons, the harp, the horse, the cows, Cengri's cat that kept mice from the granary—and now only empty casks rolled like thunder in the empty dairy.

Cengri coughed all that night. The next day and night passed in a colored dream of fever and chill. Once she dreamed someone came with broth and quilts. Once she dreamed Hedd clawed through his surrounding stone and was free. Once she dreamed she wandered alone in mountain snow and someone led her by the hand to a sunny place. Then Cengri woke alone under her thin blanket in the cold room that smelled of onions. She was hungry.

In the parlor, people were singing too loudly. Cengri crept out past the dairy, through the winter kitchen, away across the fields white with frost and all the way to the priest's house. No one answered when she knocked. Back across the churchyard she stumbled on numb feet.

But at the church there was no stone creature, only an empty hole high in the south wall. Cengri searched the long grass, calling softly, "Hedd, can you hear me? Hedd, where are you?"

Three windfall apples lay in a neat row on her father's grave. Cengri chewed them to the core and crept home.

Aunt and Uncle lay snoring on the parlor floor in a litter of broken crockery. Cengri crouched by the cold hearth, cradling the sharp frag-

ments of the painted bowl Mama had loved best. She thought of all the firewood she had chopped and what a blaze it would make if she piled it under the stairs. No one would ever know.

Instead Cengri sighed and laid a fire on the grate. Then she lifted down the filthy cauldron to scour it. Soon a broth was steaming over the coals. She woke Aunt and Uncle and fetched Aunt's girl, trembling and dull-eyed, from her hiding place in the barn loft. In her cold room she pulled her thin blanket over her head and slept.

The night was almost done when she woke to a scrabbling at the window. She opened the shutters but saw no bird or mouse, nothing but two wet, white stones on the windowsill. One stone was carved with a flowering vine, the other with a sleeping cat. She hid them under her blanket.

All that day Cengri worked in the hen house. She gathered the fresh warm eggs and propped up the broken laying shelf. She hauled out the mucky straw and carried sweet new straw from the barn loft. As she worked she talked softly to the hens. Once she thought a voice quietly spoke her name, but it was only the swallows murmuring in their nests between the sun-warmed stones.

Cengri stole a minute outside in the yard to cup one soft yellow chick in her hands. It peeped and snuggled, wanting its mother. Finally she latched the hen house door and went to fetch firewood.

Uncle brought in the oldest speckled hen for Aunt's birthday supper. Afterwards everyone sang and Aunt told riddles, almost like the good times long ago, when harpers sang by the fire and there was always enough to eat. Then the dog started to bark outside.

"Fox in the hen house!"

Uncle ran out, and soon the barnyard was noisy and swirling with lantern light. The fox had fled in a storm of bloodied feathers. One of the hens lay torn and still near the open door, and a fuzzy yellow chick peeped and pushed against her still form. Cengri kneeled and cupped its little body in her hands, giving it warmth.

"Careless child! You left the door open!" Aunt started across the barnyard shaking a stick.

"I latched the door." Cengri nudged the chick inside the hen house and got to her feet. "And I will not answer to you any longer. You are not my aunt, you are a thief in my house."

The woman's stick came down so swiftly that it whirled like a swallow's wings, and everything turned to red and black and screaming. As Cengri crumpled onto the slates with her hands pressed to her sticky face, she saw a gray stone hurtle from the hen house wall. The screams shrilled

louder and faded away.

When the sky began to brighten, Cengri crawled and rested and crawled again. At last, in the churchyard, she lay down to sleep between her mother and her father. A warm rain fell.

Cengri awoke under a blanket of fragrant leaves. Her head was pillowed on a gray stone, and she clasped her two secret stones in her sticky hand. Sometime later the priest kneeled by her side wiping her face with a wet cloth that dripped red onto his threadbare hem.

“Good child, blessed child, what have they done?”

Cengri could not speak. The old priest called out for help to the blacksmith passing by, but she would not let go of the gray stone. The blacksmith shrugged and lifted the child and her gray stone as easily as a windfall apple.

ALL SUMMER, AT DUSK, CENGRI PAUSED ON THE BLACKSMITH’S DOORSTEP TO LOOK across the churchyard at her empty house. Its shutters were latched and its door barred. The woman and the man and the girl had fled like a false rumor.

One autumn day, when the small red apples were sweet with first frost, Cengri carried Hedd down to the churchyard apple tree. Three yellow chicks had survived the fox, and now a young rooster and two hens pecked around her feet as she went. A bob-tailed white cat sat on the lowest branch of the tree. Among the currant bushes, now dropping their rusty leaves, a hare timidly snuffed the air. A doe and her spotted fawn browsed outside the sanctuary wall. While Cengri picked apples, Hedd sat in the grass playing with pebbles.

Cengri saw the priest stop at the orchard gate with the blacksmith’s wife. In the still afternoon their quiet words carried.

“She will not be parted from that gray stone,” the priest faltered.

The blacksmith’s wife wiped her big red hands on her apron and lifted her bucket. “It gives her peace. Surely that brings no harm.”

“She will be safe now.” The old man blessed her and walked on.

Across the churchyard, the blacksmith’s hammer rang out repairs, and the blacksmith’s widowed sister sang as she scoured the dairy from beams to slates. Soon Cengri and the widow would open the dairy and weed the garden. Travelers would sit by the fire telling of far places and pay silver for a night’s rest.

When her basket was full, Cengri sat beneath the apple tree and lifted Hedd. She liked his warmth on her shoulder this cool day. Geese croned overhead, flying to some sunnier place.

Suddenly Hedd pulled himself upright and whimpered at the sky.

Cengri disentangled his claws from her braid and looked up.

The flying creatures were larger than geese, larger even than swans. As their great gray wings beat slowly, their ragged cries dropped like fragments of song. Hedd cried out wordlessly and strained toward the sky, but the great ones flew too high to hear one earthbound voice. Cengri stroked his gray head. "I know, little one."

But then a long shadow fell across her feet. The great creature that crouched under the hazel tree watched her carefully from wise eyes in a gray face. It was not quite a human face, not quite a cat's face, not quite like anything. Its powerful wings were furled and its claws safely sheathed, but Cengri had never seen a living thing so terrible in its beauty.

Hedd scrambled down and across the grass. Cengri took one fearful step forward. Claws like stone knives curved tenderly around Hedd and drew him close. The two creatures nuzzled and chirred until the great one gently pushed Hedd back toward Cengri.

"But why?" she whispered.

The creature glanced at the sky.

"Until he can fly?"

Eyes that were gray in gray like living stone blinked once. Then broad wings opened and the creature climbed singing into the cool autumn air.

Cengri and Hedd watched the creatures dwindle until the sky was clear blue above the green valley and the gray mountain.

Together they gathered the last windfalls and took their basket into the blacksmith's house to bake apple cakes. A friend might visit from the four houses among the green fields, or even a traveler from the edge of the world. •

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*"It's what you were born for," the doctor said. "It would be wrong to do anything else."*

# Adapting for the Deep

Holly Phillips

HER FATHER HAD LEFT HER A NOTE ON THE KITCHEN COUNTER, scrawled in his usual telegraphic shorthand: *Station. Back 6. Bring dinner. P.*

P for Père, not D for Dolphus. Sidonie took that as a warning, one of his obscure messages only he understood. She hadn't called him Père since...when? Since their first winter here in the cabin, where they'd only ever spent summers before.

RUNNING THROUGH THE WINTER RAIN, COLD FEET LAVENDER-BLUE IN THE RAINFOREST mud. *Hemlock needles and rotting twigs, humus and black, black earth. Small fleet running feet, callused from the summer sand.*

SIDONIE TOOK OFF HER CITY SHOES AND SOCKS TO STAND BAREFOOT ON THE FLOOR. Smooth wide planks of Douglas fir, cool beneath her tender soles. The open door let in the forest smell—greenness and decay, hemlock, cedar and a tang of the sea—along with two mosquitoes that whined about her ears before being drowned out by the subsonic growl of a lightcraft taking off in the inlet. Probably the same one that had brought her here, antigrav thrashing the narrow green water into a froth as it lifted into a bumblebee hum. Over the docks and roofs of West Bamfield, over the



government wharf and winding road, over the red roof of the Marine Biology Station and the dock where Sidonie might have seen her father's boat tied up, if she'd thought to look.

If she hadn't been in such a panic over shoving the interview schedules back into her knapsack, as though he might have looked up from his lab tanks and seen them in her hands.

After the lightcraft droned away on its flight back to Victoria, the rain-forest silence overflowed, welling into the cabin with the random patter of needles off the huge hemlock outside the cabin's door. Sidonie lifted her knapsack to her shoulder, picked up her shoes and carried them into her room, idly tucking the socks in as she went. Her room was the same, a square cubby with a shed roof and a waist-high bed like a shelf, the foam mattress put away for storage. It smelled damp, as any room did left uninhabited even for a day on the west coast of Vancouver Island, and woodsy, as if the forest were infiltrating through the cracks, reclaiming the boards cut from its heart. This place was timeless. It could have been the nineteenth century instead of the first year of the twenty-third.

Sidonie shivered, feeling the weight of silence as she never did in her soundproofed apartment in the city. She dug her swimsuit out of the pack and changed, pulling her clothes back on over top as she left the cabin, shutting the door behind her.

Paddles racked over the roof of the porch, kayaks slung like hammocks, wood cut to stove lengths and stacked along the wall. The smell of the woods, of old salt on slickers hung to dry, of the composting outhouse that never quite seemed to work. The evocation of childhood.

*PÈRE, PÈRE, THERE'S A BEAR IN THE WOODS!*

*Better stay in then, sweet.*

*But Père, Père, I have to pee.*

*Better take a light, then, and sing all the way to the outhouse.*

*What should I sing, Père?*

*Sing "Go away bears, oh bears, oh go away..." (to the tune of "Rule Britannia, Britannia, rule the waves...")*

SHE TOOK THE OLD PATH TO THE BEACH, IGNORING THE NEW FENCE, THE PRIVATE Property signs. Her feet were tender. She took the mile slow. The last turn through dark trees, the bank of slick clay and wet ferns where the far sigh of waves became a bass surge and countersurge—everything was exactly as it should be, private property or no. She picked her way over black pebbles and coarse gray sand to leap the high tide line of seaweed and crumbled bark. Above the reach of the receding tide she dropped her clothes, ran over wet sand and into the ice-cold waves.

Tumbled salt foam. The jade-green light of a distant and clouded sun. Cold on her skin, ache of air in her sinuses, in her lungs. The liquid, pacific grasp of the sea. She dove, surfaced once past the surf to be sure that the bay, the beach, the black basaltic headlands were without watchers. Then swam, cresting the waves, towards the small islands that broke the vast oceanic swells. Blood thickened and warmed, dense with a hidden red; sinuses throbbed, tender to every nuance of the water-borne sonic world; pupils grew, encompassing brown irises, gathering the underwater light. Subtle changes, invisible differences that ruled the order of her life. Limber and strong as the seal whose genes she carried, she twisted to dive again, deep towards the roots that anchored the spring kelp reaching broad golden leaves towards the surface, and was, finally, home.

*FLOATING AT THE SURFACE OF A DEEP GREEN SEA, DEEPER THAN HE'S EVER TAKEN HER before. The far beach is a line of white backed by trees like a prickly hedge. Père's wetsuit makes him black and sleek as an Orca. Her skin glows pale green where the water tints the light.*

*Take a deep breath—*

*Can we go in now?*

*You haven't found your prize yet. Don't you want your prize?*

*I'm cold, Père.*

*One more dive. I'll bet you find it this time. Take a deep—*

*But I'm c-c-cold!*

*Sidonie.*

*One long breaker curls away from them, heading into shore. Yes, Puh-père.*

*Take a deep breath, and remember to count up to thirty to give your eyes time to adjust.*

*Yes, Puh-père.*

*You'll find it this time. I know you will. You're a good girl, sweet.*

DOLPHUS WAS IN THE CABIN FRYING FISH WHEN SHE RETURNED.

"Good swim?" he said with a glance at her wet hair.

"Yes."

"You'll be hungry, then. It's nearly ready." He turned a salmon steak, pink on one side, ocher on the other.

"I'll just change." She went into her room, thinking ironically, Hello love, how wonderful to see you, what brings you home?

He'd moved her knapsack to make room for the mattress on her bunk. She froze, colder in her gut than the ocean, but of course he would never have looked inside her pack. It wouldn't even have occurred to him. What secret could she have that could be greater than the one he already knew?

*SMALL COLD FEET RUNNING, SMALL HEART POUNDING WITH AN EXISTENTIAL TERROR TOO old for an eight-year-old soul. Running until the forest air tastes of blood and reminds her of the deep dive, the naked dive to the very edge of darkness where the ocean hissed and moaned. The dive she wasn't ever, ever supposed to make without her father. The dive she'd taken alone.*

*Never again! He shakes her. Never again!*

*But why, Père, why? He has never shaken her before.*

*Because if anyone sees you they'll know you're –*

*What?*

*He didn't say. She ran because of the answer his silence gave her.*

*Because if anyone sees you they'll know you're not real.*

DOLPHUS BENT HIS HEAD OVER HIS PLATE TALKING ABOUT ONE OF HIS STUDENTS, his scalp pink and vulnerable in its horseshoe of graying hair. "How do you convince someone like that that industry is a fair substitute for genius? She wants to believe that if she sits still long enough brilliance will drop into her lap like a prize." He stopped to tongue a bone out of his mouth.

Sidonie poked at the black skin from her steak and said, "I'm applying to Space Exploration."

Her father worried at the bone with such concentration he might not have heard her. Or was hoping he'd heard her wrong.

"I've already passed the entrance exams. They've given me an interview date in July."

Dolphus found the bone, plucked it off his lip and set it delicately on the rim of his plate. "Who's doing the physical examination?"

"Dr. Finibar has already agreed..."

"Lida Finibar!" He set his fists on either side of his plate and fixed her with his heavy stare. "My God. So after all these years, it's her you decide to listen to instead of me. When will you realize that I am the one who offers you your freedom, not her?"

Sidonie took a breath, suffocated by his anger. "She says she can oversee all the testing, all the way through, since she's on the board."

Dolphus merely stared, letting her talk with a patience that was nearly violent.

"She, she says there's a survey being planned for an ocean world. The initial explorers' report didn't give it a high rating, but apparently there's been some change in the climate..." She took another breath. The sea never weighed on her like this. "Dr. Finibar is confident she can get me assigned, even as new as my degree is, on the basis of my diving. And I know the submersibles they intend to use..."

Finally, into her silence, Dolphus spoke. "No." He cleared his throat, set

his fork gently on his plate among the bones. "I forbid it. You may not go."

Sidonie found herself shaking, a hiss in her ears. "The interview is already set. Dr. Finibar says—"

"There is no argument, Sidonie. You will not go." He rose, picked up his plate and hers, although she had eaten nothing.

"It's my decision to make!"

He stood looking down at her, the plates in his hands. "I am the one they will imprison when they discover what you are. I am the one who says you will not go."

Why was it she could adapt to the ocean, but not to this? "Dr. Finibar says—"

"Dr. Finibar lost you when you were a cluster of undifferentiated cells. She will not steal you back now. No more, Sidonie. You will not go." He set the plates down—gently, gently—and walked out of the cabin, back to his lab through the rain.

*CAN ANYONE TELL ME WHAT THE ENGENDERED WERE?*

*Monsters! Krishna points at the girls and makes laser gun sounds with his mouth.*

*Well, not quite, Krishna. Can anyone tell me? Sidonie?*

*They were people who were genetically engineered as embryos and grew up to have physiological characteristics outside the human norm.*

*Silence.*

*That's...very good, Sidonie.*

*My father's a geneticist. He worked for the government before.*

*Does he make monsters? Krishna asks.*

*No!*

*I bet he does.*

*Yeah, I bet he does.*

*All right, class. Now, can anyone tell me why there aren't any engendered anymore?*

*'Cause the Monster Squad killed them all. Pzow! Pzow!*

*That's enough, Krishna. Go ahead, Elise.*

*I think there aren't any more engendered because they were bad for human rights? And the government wouldn't let anyone make anymore?*

*'Cept Sidonie's father in his monster lab.*

*I'm warning you, Krishna . . .*

*Pzow!*

DR. FINIBAR CALLED HER THE DAY BEFORE HER PHYSICAL. "I'VE BEEN TALKING WITH Dolphus," she said without preamble. She was small, Swedish, focused. "He seemed to think you weren't going through with it."

"I am. Don't worry."

The doctor's blue eyes had four pixels each on Sidonie's screen. "He isn't rational about this, Sido. He never has been."

"About me?" Sidonie forced a smile. "Or about being pilloried as a mad scientist and thrown in jail?"

"About separating the science from the personal. He's not the only one with a future at stake here."

"You know I appreciate your help, Lida."

"It's what you were born for," the doctor said. "It would be wrong to do anything else."

It's what you were born for. But Sidonie heard the doctor's truth underneath: It's what you were *made* for.

Which was, after all, true.

*HELLO! YOU'RE SIDO GOSSELIN, AREN'T YOU? MY, YOU'RE SUCH A BIG GIRL! HOW OLD are you, dear? Five?*

*I'm not supposed to talk to strangers.*

*But I'm not a stranger! The blond lady laughs. I knew you when you were this small.*

*The sharp pink nails pinch a few millimeters of air.*

*Sidonie is dubious. Nobody's that small. And Père said—*

*—you aren't supposed to talk to strangers. The blond lady looks serious. Your father's right, and you're a very good girl to remember what he says. But I've come a long, long way especially so I could visit you. You aren't going to make me go away after coming so far?*

*Sidonie bites her lip, uncertain. Grown-ups aren't supposed to talk to kids they don't know in the playground, but Shelly the supervisor is looking over and she isn't telling the blond lady to go away.*

*Père's coming to pick me up soon.*

*Oh, good! Because I want to talk to him, too. But it's you I came especially to see. Shall we sit on the bench over there and get to know one another? I'll bet you're a good swimmer, aren't you?*

*Uh-huh. I can put my face in the water and float and hold my breath and everything.*

*I'll just bet you can!*

THE WORLD GOVERNMENT BUILDING IN VICTORIA HAD BEEN ERECTED BEHIND THE old provincial parliament building on the harborfront. Its designers had made an enormous effort to make it seem powerfully modern, and as a consequence it seemed more dated than the graceful dome and pillars of the building older by nearly three centuries. Sidonie was an hour early for her interview. She bought a ticket and wandered through the



museum, Dr. Finibar's sealed data chips locked in a sweating fist shoved deep in her pocket. Image after image of the past registered no deeper than the back of her eyes. Her mind was focused on the impenetrable void of the future. Would the Committee accept Dr. Finibar's falsified test results? Or would Lida and Dolphus and all their former colleagues go to prison, and Sidonie—

In a way it was easy for her because she didn't know what she was risking. No engendered had been discovered in her lifetime, none that the government admitted to, anyway. Perhaps there were others like her, secret experiments deemed dangerous to a fragile new global society based on the delicately rooted predicate that all human beings were created equal. All of them, without exception—except for the ones created in labs and designed for superiority. Superiority could bring the whole structure down more surely than any weakness ever could. Yet Dolphus and Dr. Finibar and the rest had gone on working, desiring the bright future, convinced that they had the responsibility and the right to improve humanity at a level society could not reach. The responsibility and the right to send them out to live among the stars.

Until Dolphus changed his mind and stole the experiment in its artificial womb.

*WHAT WOULD HAPPEN TO ME IF ANYONE FOUND OUT?*

*Run you through mazes, kid, and feed you electrode soup.*

*I'm serious, Dolphus. What would they do? A breathlessness that was almost excitement. Would they kill me?*

*No, kid. I'm the one they'd punish.*

*But what would they do? Would they just let me go?*

*You'd be the victim, Sidonie. They'd take care of you for the rest of your life.*

*That's not so bad!*

*You sure? Is this the same girl who cried to see the seals in their enclosure at the aquarium?*

*It's not the same thing.*

*Oh yes it is, my sweet. It's exactly the same thing.*

THE LONG INTERVIEW WAS NEARLY DONE. THE COMMITTEE WAS UNREADABLE BEHIND their table. Seven people doing their job. Just another day at the office.

Sidonie blinked at the black spots in front of her eyes. Swallowed, though her mouth was paper dry, and braced herself for the final question.

"Why do you think colonization is important to humanity?"

"We have to go out. There's still so many of us on Earth, we're a major burden on a fragile biosphere. We need to lighten the load."

"But we can do that just within the Solar system, with the Habitats and

the colonies on Mars. Why inter-system expansion?"

"Because without room to change, we will stagnate and die."

"Could you expand on that idea?"

"We've come so far in the last couple of centuries, made the decisions necessary to save the planet and ourselves, but to gain peace we've given up diversity. Children learn the global ideology in schools all over the world. I don't say that's a bad thing, but just as biological systems need diversity to survive, to adapt and to grow, so do social systems.

"Different communities adapt in different ways. Centuries of pogroms and wars proved that social stresses can be as deadly as environmental ones. If one community adapts more effectively to stress than another, that's a resource the whole species can benefit from. But if we're all enclosed within a single system, we're locked into whatever pattern we create. Other communities too far away to threaten our tribal instincts would also be far enough away not to be trapped in that pattern along with us. They would give us the diversity necessary for survival. For a global society, exploration and colonization aren't luxuries, they're necessities."

"You present some very interesting ideas."

"I know they're not very sophisticated, but it's something I care a lot about."

"On the contrary, it's been a pleasure talking with you. Thank you very much, Dr. Gosselin. Our office will be in touch as soon as your medical files have been reviewed."

*HERE, DR. FINIBAR HANDS HER A BOOK CHIP ONCE SHE'S DRESSED. READ THIS BEFORE your interview.*

*What is it?*

*Kamazawa's Cultural Diversity and Global Survival. The chair of your interview committee was a student of hers. It might help.*

*Sidonie slowly puts the chip in her pocket. So we're cheating at this, too.*

*Second thoughts?*

*What if we're wrong? What if I don't belong on Survey?*

*The needles and machines have given her doubts—or released doubts she's been trying to ignore.*

*Dr. Finibar is impatient. You passed the psychological screens with flying colors. They put you in the "ideal recruit" category, just as I've always said they would. How much more proof do you need?*

*Then why do I have to go through all this? She waves a hand at the medical equipment, the computer already reprogrammed to fudge her results.*

*Listen to me, Sidonie. Could you get yourself accepted without "all this"? You know you could not, despite your qualifications, despite your skills. Yet you have no less right to apply than any other human being on this planet. You were dis-*

*qualified by a fearful and unjust government years before you were ever born. "All this" is simply the means that allow us to overcome that artificial barrier so that we may see your destiny fulfilled.*

*The means that allow me to fulfill my destiny. Fulfill it...or escape it.*

*But she only says it to herself in the elevator going down.*

THE EVENING AFTER THE INTERVIEW. SIDONIE SIGNED ONTO THE HOSTEL'S telephone and tried to call her father again, but still there was no reply. Dolphus' recorded image looked at her from the screen, harried, a little out of focus as if he were on his way to someplace else. *If it's an emergency, please call the biology department's main number...* But the telemail labyrinth deposited her at the same place. She pressed the message key and then discovered she had nothing to say. She stared at his frozen blurry image for three breaths, four, five, before she remembered she was being recorded.

"Dolphus... The interview went okay. I think...I think...Père, if they accept me, I'm going. I do love you. But I have to go." She wiped at her tears. "I'm so tired of pretending. I need to find somewhere I can be myself."

Frozen Dolphus did not respond. Where was he? Hiding already from the police he was so sure would come? She rubbed at her face again, tasting salt like the sea.

"If you're right, if—I just want to say I'm sorry. You don't have to forgive me, but I hope you understand. I just can't stick to the shallows anymore. I need the deep waters, Père, it's what you and Dr. Finibar— It's what I was born for, and if I can't find it here, I'll look for it somewhere else. I just wish you would understand that and let me go."

His dark eyes looked at her from out of the screen, but he did not see her at all.

*LATE, LATE IN THE NIGHT. THE CITY IS NOT QUIET, ANY MORE THAN THE HARBORFRONT is dark, but there is no one about. Quaint old streetlights are reflected on the water, rippled suns that shine yellow in front of the paler constellation of an ancient tradition, the parliament building clothed in lights. Sidonie hides in the shadow of a stairway leading from the sidewalk to the quay in order to shuck her clothes. Thinking she would only be in the city for a day or two she did not pack her suit. She strips to her skin. Imagine the look on the face of the policeman who caught her! But nudity is no longer a crime, only a sin. The cool coastal air is sweet on her skin. She hesitates at the edge of the quay, then dives. Reflected suns break apart, dance, slowly coalesce. Sidonie swims strongly for the sea, forgetting her father, forgetting Lida Finibar, body and mind already adapting for the deep. •*

*Hanging over our heads are our  
children. Each piloting a ship that can  
destroy a city at the flick of a finger...*

# Pisces

Carl Sieber

MY DAUGHTER IS ABOARD ONE OF THOSE FIGHTERS, SMALL and deadly. Idly casting dice in zero G, clattering them against the bulkhead, contemplating her options as they rebound to twist alongside her in the stale air. Or, even more likely she's suspending tarot cards in a drifting halo around her, although if she's an angel it's a destroying one. She's waiting for the dice, or the cards, or the official orders to tell her to attack, whichever comes first; and I'm sure she's cheating at the cards, bending her interpretations towards mayhem.

We haven't spoken in a year, yet despite the distance, and the atmosphere between us, I continue to believe I still have some connection to her. I can feel her in her high cold orbit and I know she's edgy. I've always known her to be edgy.

"Speaker Thompson."

She's edgy and will have grown bored with the cards by now.

"Speaker Thompson?"

I rise quickly to my feet, aware now of the silence that has been growing awkward. My glance jumps from the audience to the podium and comes to rest upon the television cameras. "Yes," I say to the cameras, "yes... I was...allowing enough silence for full consideration to be given

to the previous speaker's words." Yet as I move to the podium with practiced dignity I cannot recall any part of what the previous speaker said. Instead of remembering his words I remember my daughter's: "I'm so tired of your excuses, Dad." She will have grown bored with the cards by now. I always did criticize her attention span.

The crowd is restless; because of my personal distraction I have caused a break in the smooth flow of words intended to soothe them. The other speakers are displeased and I remind myself there are political reputations to maintain tonight. Lifting my eyes and my voice I begin to address the crowd. "Good evening." These are people who want their answers directly, people who won't stand for the safe distance of a television screen, people who have fought through the streets to this place and what do I have to give them? "Good evening; we are all frightened tonight," I say and someone with a megaphone screams back: "Fucking angry is what we are."

Yes, he's frightened.

My suit is hot, my tie almost strangling.

The man with the bullhorn continues. "You got something to say to us or you just going to stand there?"

"My own daughter left with the Piper." I speak this directly into the microphone and it booms out like a shock wave. It's the shared bitterness that reaches the shouting man; he does not sit but his voice cuts off as if I've said every word he needed to say.

"Fifteen," I add.

It is not what I am supposed to be saying and my notes crumple as my hand clenches.

The Piper.

That charismatic, enigmatic, god-damn technological Santa Claus. He'd claimed to be the representative of an alien race and he'd romanced us, charmed us, given us so much of what we wanted, made us love him with his gifts of wondrous new toys, and then...when, according to his whims, he'd decided we hadn't loved him enough, he'd left in a rage, taking most of our children with him.

Well he, and they, were back now. They'd obliterated Italy as a sort of hello.

All of it.

"We were in the mood and it was fun," said the Piper yesterday, the day the same destruction was visited on Canada.

Today the sky all over the planet rang with his laughing voice in three hundred languages: "We liked the way Italy burned, and Canada was even bigger, even better."



I wonder how the year has changed her. Without question she'd be enhanced, probably augmented at the sub-microscopic level in ways I would have trouble relating to or understanding. Deliberately so. In the same way she'd tattooed herself only after I'd said I wouldn't allow it.

"Negotiations are being conducted at the highest levels," I say, swerving back to my speech and trying to uncrumple my notes, needing for the moment to look anywhere but out at the crowd I have been told to soothe.

Hanging over our heads are our children. Each piloting a ship that can destroy a city at the flick of a finger. We can see them at night, closer and more brilliant than the stars, thousands of ships. Each fighter sharp and moody in its attacks, evasive and subtle in its defense. Above all they are together, each with others of its kind. Each of our runaway children quivering in space with pent up energy, restlessly shifting, adjusting, moving, the whole collection of them nervously flashing in the darkness as each attempts to find the place where they belong.

I am visibly perspiring. I don't know if I care that the cameras will record this, but my makeup might run.

"Let me tell you a fish story," I say.

It is the crowd's shock that lets me continue speaking in relative quiet. "I am a diver, It's my passion. Two summers ago, I was diving with my daughter. What will help you imagine that day? The taste of saltwater? The press and caress of the sea? The muffled sound of your breath escaping as a stream of bubbles?

"It was one of the few times my daughter and I went diving together. She'd asked for years but it had never been convenient. Things like that had never been easy between us. But that day I particularly remember as one of the better times. It was while watching a school of fish that I realized how much I was enjoying my daughter's company. We were both grinning around our respirators. For me it was the wonder that my daughter had let me teach her how to dive. For her it was the fish. A thousand she guessed, a great school of them, darting and shimmering around and between us. The way they turned and wheeled fascinated her. 'The whole bunch of them would change direction instantly,' she'd said later. 'One of them must have decided to turn, but which fish decided? One fish turned, and bang, in a sudden flash of silver they were all turning.'

"I remember her grin. It was rare, but I do remember it."

I look away from the cameras and the crowd to compose myself. After the dive, after her mask came off and her grin was huge, I stared at that tattoo she'd needled into her face and for maybe the first time the anger

in me was asleep enough for the design to actually make sense. "Pisces," I'd said. "The two fish." Her grin had faltered, had lost its brilliance and she'd brought up one hand to cover her cheek. I dropped the matter then, but caught myself studying the design at odd moments later that day. She caught me staring as well and grew at first irritated, and then angry with the scrutiny. Soon enough we were hating each other again.

She'd chosen the tattoo with deliberation.

To anger me?

So I'd assumed.

"I'd like to dive with you, Dad," she'd said again and again.

Sweat runs down my neck, soaking into my collar. I look up and take out my handkerchief to wipe at my face.

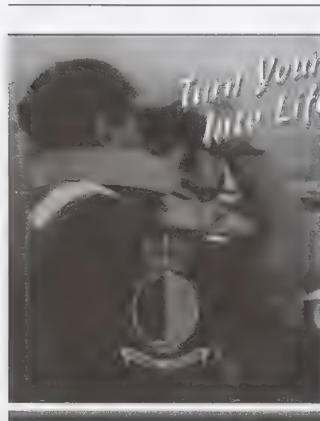
Her mother always said she took after me.

I continue wiping my face, scrubbing at my left cheek until I'm sure I've wiped all the makeup free. I fold the handkerchief then, methodically, steadying my hands with this simple task while allowing the cameras to refocus on my face. To zoom, to magnify, to zoom again, until the swirling calligraphy of blue and black across the left side of my face resolves into two fish swimming together. The tattoo is not fresh, it's at least a month old, made as a mark of mourning; today it becomes my mark of hope.

"Remember," I say and give time for the cameras to pull their focus back slightly as I speak directly to them. "Remember, all it took was the decision of one fish."

I know my daughter. I know she's watching. I can feel it.

Remember. One fish. •



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## about our contributors

E.L. CHEN is also an artist, which means she's pretty much screwed unless she marries rich. This is her third appearance in *On Spec*. Everything else that she doesn't mind you knowing can be found at [www.geocities.com/elchensite](http://www.geocities.com/elchensite).

JAINE FENN lives in a culture-free but picturesque town in rural England, from where she takes an amateur interest in other people's cultures—past, present and future. Her unrealized dreams include seeing the Earth from space, staying in every room in Portmeirion and making a decent living from writing. She would happily settle for two out of three.

JAMES STEPHEN FORREST says "I am an assistant principal at a French Immersion school in Airdrie, Alberta. I have written fiction—particularly short stories—off and on for a good part of my life. However, during my thirties the only writing I did was for my graduate degree (an M.Ed. in Educational Administration). Always at the back of my mind, however, I have never really let my stories go. Now in my forties, I am glad that I have again taken up the call. This is my first story to ever reach 'publication status.' It has been a long time coming."

GRANT LEIER (please see "About our cover artist, page 51).

MICHAEL LIBLING's short stories have appeared in such magazines as *Realms of Fantasy*, *Amazing Stories*, *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, as well as the paperback anthology, *Destinations Unknown*. Michael lives in Montreal with his wife and daughters. Among other things, he has been a talk show host, newspaper columnist, and advertising creative director. What's more, he is a former student of Mordecai Richler and Clark Blaise (former head of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa), proving he is not averse to name-dropping.

CATHERINE MACLEOD lives, writes, and ponders in Nova Scotia. She wrote "All a Woman Needs" after being scolded for smiling too often. However, she has never, to her knowledge, been abducted.

SUSAN MAYSE, a Vancouver Islander, is the award-winning author of four books and many other works for print and electronic media. She wrote "Hedd" for her daughter Heledd, who loves gargoyles.

HOLLY PHILLIPS lives in what may be the only garret with a view in south-central British Columbia. Holly recently joined the *On Spec* editorial collective, and is currently buried under an avalanche of manuscripts.

KATE RIEDEL is originally from Frostbite Falls, Minnesota, but has been a card-carrying Canadian for oh, years and years. She lives in Toronto with one poet and two cats. Previous publication credits include *Not One of Us*, *On Spec*, and *Realms of Fantasy*.

CARL SIEBER says "There's a table by my desk that I pile my published stories on and it's not a very big table yet. So I pull on my yellow gum-boots, go walking

down by the sea, come back, sit down, and see what I can do about getting a bigger table."

GORDON SNYDER lives and works in Burnaby, British Columbia. He produces paintings and drawings using an "all pencil," which draws onto the wet surface of printmaking paper, and finishes the work using acrylic washes when the drawing is dry. An independent curator and consultant, Snyder is an authority on Western Canadian art and has owned and operated galleries and consulting firms in Canada since the late seventies. His artwork and his philosophy of life reflect the folly and the contradictory nature of the human condition. •

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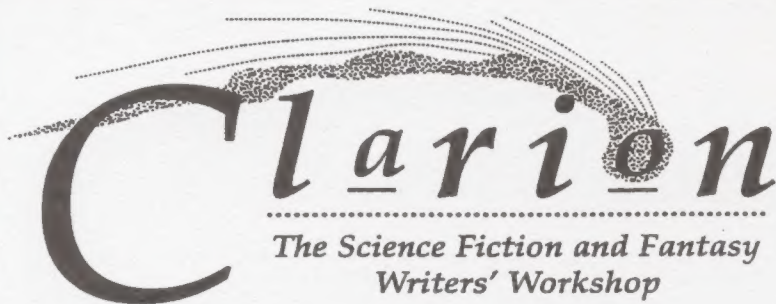
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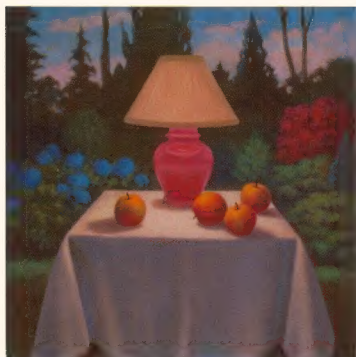
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Tom Miller — Dreaming of Miro  
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